Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art
Volume 3 Number 3
© 2016 Intellect Ltd Article. English language. doi: 10.1386/jcca.3.3.223_1

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Landscape without nature: Ecological reflections in contemporary Chinese art

ABSTRACT

Nature (ziran) *has been a key concept in Chinese art, yet the 'nature' celebrated in Chinese* shanshui *paintings and gardens are already abstract inventions, bearing only tenuous connections with the physical world beyond human habitation and control. This article studies several contemporary 'landscapes' that are devoid of conventionally defined nature, including Yang Yongliang and Yao Lu's deceptively traditional* shanshui *that are in fact collages of scenes of urban congestion and pollution, Zhan Wang and Zhang Jianjun's use of industrial materials to manufacture objects that signify 'nature' in domestic settings, as well as Miao Xiaochun's seemingly straightforward portrayals of modern life that employ the compositional principles of* shanshui *to create sensations of the surreal. Those works have been interpreted as critiques of urbanization and commodification, but the ecological sensibilities they embody, I argue, are meant to undo the binary between nature and culture. Through seductive yet subversive appropriation of the conventional representations of nature, they remove the concept from a 'transcendental, unified, independent category' and reveal it as diverse, malleable and intimate, at once subject to and elusive from human interventions. Showing that the physical world becomes visible only through the mediation of metaphors and imagery, this article also stresses the role aesthetics plays in our interactions with the environment.*

KEYWORDS

contemporary Chinese art
eco-criticism
landscape painting
environmental art
aesthetics of nature
culture

In no other culture tradition has nature played a more important role in the arts than in that of China.

('Nature in Chinese Culture', Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

[Jia Baoyu says] When (the ancients) speak of a 'natural painting,' I can't help wondering if they are not referring to precisely that forcible interference with the landscape to which I object.

(Cao 1973: 336–37)

INTRODUCTION

When it comes to Chinese art, the concept 'nature' – a word that entered the modern Chinese lexicon as *ziran* in the late nineteenth century[1] – is at once crucial and perplexing: unlike the astute teenager Jia Baoyu of the eighteenth century, who protested that the mountains and waters in his lavish family garden Daguan Yuan were mere artificial constructions in a highly improbable site, the connoisseurs and critics of Chinese art today still tend to see the representations of nature in Chinese gardens and landscape paintings (*shanshui*) as purer and less anthropocene than their western counterparts. This perception was rooted in both modern interpretations of traditional Chinese aesthetics and early studies of landscape art in the West. Art historians have argued that, in the theories of literati art, to capture the 'spirit' or 'essence' (*shen*) of the cosmos with a cultivated yet spontaneous sensibility was the ultimate goal (Tu 1976; Bush 1971), and landscape, both physical and portrayed, serves as an intermediary that unites the microcosmic with the macrocosmic, the humane with the 'natural'. Early western studies of landscape paintings, on the other hand, tend to marginalize the Chinese tradition or denigrate it as primitive and irrational, 'closely bound up with an almost mystical reverence for the powers of nature' (Clark 1970: 638). Such a view has been at once refuted and reinforced in works of ecocriticism since the 1970s. Describing the European, Judaeo-Christian view of nature as human-centred and technocratic, the advocates of Deep Ecology praise the 'animalist' and pantheist beliefs of non-western cultures as more intuitive and less instrumental (White 1967; Manes 1992), and Asians, with their reputed spiritualism, were increasingly seen as living in 'some sort of mystical harmony with Nature' by the end of the twentieth century (Hudson 2014: 951). Chinese landscape painting, in which rocks and trees take the central role and human presence is barely visible, seems a primal example of such an attitude, and it is still seen as an art that conveys true appreciation of – and compatibility with – nature (Turner 2009).

A closer look at the ecological history of non-western cultures, however, reveals that they were no more benign: advanced civilizations across the globe collapsed due to their ruthless exploitation of their environments; species were driven to extinction once humans – Native Americans and European colonizers alike – acquired more efficient means to hunt (Diamond 2011). The case of China is equally striking: throughout history, the Chinese population battled, manipulated and exploited nature in ways that rivalled or exceeded those of the Europeans, leading to large-scale deforestation, water shortage, soil degradation and natural disasters of escalating orders (Elvin 2006; Marks 2011). Population pressure, together with dense, irrigation-based agriculture and high levels of urbanization, were the main causes, but the Chinese views of nature may have contributed to the ecological abuses as well. Elvin

1. 自然, in its modern sense, first appeared in Chinese in the 1864 translation of Henry Wheaton's *Elements of International Law*, and like many neologisms of modern China, it appropriates a word that already existed in classical Chinese yet acquired new meanings in Japanese (*shizen*), see Masini (1993: 87) and Liu (1995: 326). I will discuss the trajectory of this concept in more detail later.

eloquently argues that the nature admired by Chinese poets, as manifested in the works as early as those of Xie Lingyun in the fourth century, was already a 'civilized wildness' shaped by human economic activities, and even the sympathetic feelings expressed for a pristine nature in early literature were likely nostalgic or compensatory reactions to the destructive actions taken in physical reality (Elvin 2006: 335–68). Indeed, it was not a coincidence that the art of landscape paintings thrived more than ever in Song dynasty China as well as in the seventeenth century Netherlands, where humans exerted the most comprehensive and visible impact on topography prior to modern times: landscape paintings naturalize and 'historicize' human interventions, turning real estates and commercial undertakings into sites of contemplation and beauty (Alpers 1983; Adams 1994; Cahill 1988; Clunas 1996). One may observe that, instead of inducing ecologically responsible behaviours, the lofty visions of nature in Chinese art disguise, sublimate and legitimize the mundane interactions between humans and the environment, rendering the physical realities vacuous and invisible.

Those seemingly paradoxical approaches to nature in Chinese art and culture, however, are partially the results of the epistemological trajectory of *ziran* from classical to modern times. Literally meaning 'being so of its own accord', the word first appears in the Taoist canon *Dao De Jing* and refers to 'the property of something to be what it is of its own intrinsic nature' (Elvin 2010: 20), which, together with the equally abstruse and all-encompassing *Dao*, serves as the model and inner principle of all beings (人法地，地法天，天法道，道法自然). In other words, the sphere of man and culture is seen as *contained within* – and hence consistent with – that of *ziran*, not separated from it. Later usage of the word in literary and artistic criticism, which signifies effortless (*wu suo mianqiang*), intuitive (*hunran tian cheng*) and 'unadorned' (*bu jia diaozhuo*) creations, also reinforces the connection between human nature and the external world. Neo-Confucianism, the philosophy that prevailed among Chinese intellectuals in the Song dynasty, further theorizes the coherence between the macrocosmic nature and the microcosmic 'nature' of human affairs, and landscape paintings (*shanshui*), maturing at the same time, were conceived as the representation and visualization of *both* the cosmic principle and the ideal social order that manifests it. As the Song master Guo Xi (after 1000–ca. 1090) deftly explains in his *Linquan gao zhi*, the 'ordered arrangement' of mountains in a painting resembles 'a great lord glorious on his throne and a hundred princes hastening to pay him court', while that of trees 'a nobleman dazzling in his prime with all lesser mortal in his service, without insolent or oppressed attitudes' (Bush and Shih 1985). The miniature 'nature' showcased in traditional Chinese gardens is even more geared to human needs and beliefs: its celebrated design is governed by symbolic meanings, aesthetic conventions and practical concerns such as horticultural productions and domestic amusements (Clunas 1996).

Clearly, the traditional connotation of *ziran* differs from the meaning it acquired as the standard rendering of 'nature' (also as *ziranjie* or *daziran*) – the cosmos and biosphere that stands opposite to the world of human affairs and operates according to the law of science – in modern times.[2] However, in the discourse of landscape paintings, art critics continued to use the word in its traditional sense even in the early twentieth century,[3] and artists continued to paint *shanshui* that bore little resemblance to the 'real', visible nature. Even the reform-minded artists of the Lingnan School seldom departed from traditional motifs in their landscape paintings.[4] Only

2. The meaning of *ziran* retains much of its traditional meanings even today, especially when used as an adjective. For a detailed study of how *ziran* morphed to its modern form, see Yang (2014).

3. The debates in the field of Chinese paintings centred on issues such as 'imitation of the ancient' (*mogu*), realism vs expressionism, and the reform of literati paintings (*wenren hua*). *Ziran*, when mentioned by prominent figures such as Jin Cheng (1878–1926) and Chen Hengke (1876–1923), still means 'spontaneous' or 'unadorned'. Only the aesthetician Deng Yizhe (1892–1973) refers *ziran* in its modern sense – as the external biosphere free from human interventions – when discussing the difference between Chinese and western paintings, and argues that 'Chinese paintings emphasize nature, while western paintings emphasize human life'. (Deng [1928] 1996).

4. In their attempt to craft a new 'national painting' (*guohua*), Lingnan artists use bolder colours, dramatic composition and observational details, and endow their subject matters (especially animals and flowers) with new formal vigor as well as symbolic significance. Their landscapes occasionally adopt modern subject matters such as airplanes, but the format and content remain largely conventional (Croizier 1988).

after 1949 were traditional *shanshui* artists compelled to incorporate more of the external world into the established repertory of landscape in ways that suggest the split between *ziran* and the human world: revolutionary landmarks, industrial projects and modern machinery frequently appear among mountains and waters, pronouncing man's proud dominance over nature. But the traditional role of visualized *ziran* did not vanish: the new *shanshui* are still loaded with symbolic meanings that range from nationalist zeal to glorification of heroic figures, especially Mao (Andrews 1994: 176–200). Jia Baoyu's observations are even more astute than it first appears: *ziran* is never entirely free from the 'forcible interference' of the human world in the landscape art of China.

Like *ziran*, the concept of nature also went through drastic changes in the western context, and recent scholarship has argued that its current connotation – as an entity free from human interference – was a modern invention (Elvin 2010; Wulf 2015). Departing from its earlier naivety, ecocritical studies also increasingly question the binary between nature and culture (Garrard 2012: 86–92): the former is rarely pristine wildness, and the latter never equals to a 'concrete jungle' (Braddock and Irmscher 2009: 9). Based on such reflections, scholars today begin to envision an ecological view 'without' and 'after' the clichéd conceptualization of nature: an environmental aesthetics that sees the natural world as historical, societal and subject to human interventions (Morton 2007: 13), and 'an aesthetics of damage' in the anthropocene world that demands 'a way of living with harm and not disowning the place that is harmed' (Purdy 2015: 195). The apocalyptic yet hauntingly beautiful photographs of 'manufactured landscapes' by Edward Burtynsky, many of which were taken in China, are often cited as illustrations of such aesthetics, but several contemporary Chinese artists have made works that re-conceptualize nature in equally provocative but more nuanced manners – by engaging with the traditional art of landscape, critically and creatively. Their works, however, are seldom read in a way that articulates their complex dealings with ecology and aesthetics. In this article, I examine three groups of such artworks: they appropriate and transform the rich conventions of traditional landscapes, yet the world they portray is diverse, malleable and contemporary, at once subject to and elusive from human interventions. Each of the works construes an environment that is palpably 'real' yet becomes notable only through established visual devices, hence reminds the viewers how crucial a role aesthetics play in our understanding of and relations with the physical world.

THE URBAN PICTURESQUE: *SHANSHUI* OF MODERN CITIES

Yang Yongliang's Phantom Landscape series (2007) excel in its deceptive authenticity: looking from a distance, his monochromatic mountains and waters bear uncanny resemblance to those of traditional Chinese landscapes. The boulders are wrapped in clouds, shaped schematically, unfolding in rhythmic variations of density and distance, and shaded with repeated horizontal and vertical marks that echo the textural brushstrokes (*cun*) that characterize literati landscapes. Following the same conventions, the bodies of water are left blank, and the shorelines protrude and recede in familiar patterns. The strategically placed red 'seals' and inscription complete the overall resemblance to literati *shanshui*. The only details that seem out of place are the cranes, which are meant to stand in for trees. Despite the unsightly arms of the cranes, however, the 'phantom' holds its mesmerizing

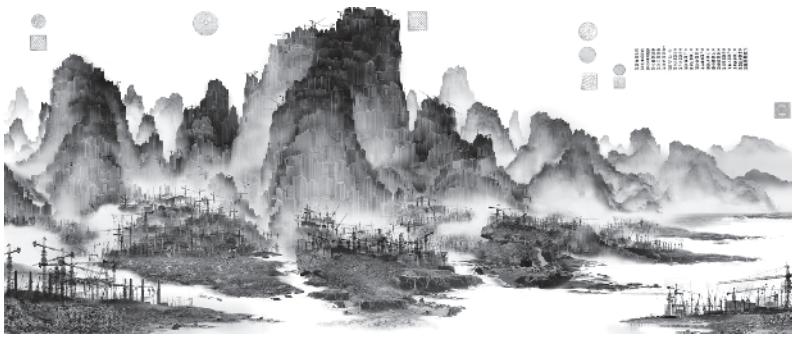

Figure 1: Yang Yongliang (b. 1980), Summer Mountains (xia shan tu), Phantom Landscape II, No. 1*, 2007. Epson Ultragiclee Print on Epson fine art paper, 60 x 132cm.*

appeal, and the viewer encounters a moment of wonder when she zooms in and realizes that the mountains are made of skyscrapers, and the islands construction debris.

Yang studied ink-wash painting and calligraphy in his youth and majored in media art and digital design in the art academies of Shanghai; his urban landscapes certainly result from this combination of trainings and sensibilities. But to create such deceptively 'real' *shanshui* is no easy task. In his first Phantom Landscape series (2006), the contour of the skyscrapers remains clearly detectable; the 'mountains', therefore, appear rectangular and 'unnatural'. Even the composition retains the layout of a – albeit condensed and distorted – modern city. The works in 2007, on the other hand, become much more plausible landscapes in the conventional sense: the sizes of individual buildings are drastically reduced so that they become mere ink traces, the dramatic contrast between light and dark is enhanced, and the overall composition often models after well-known works by Song and Yuan masters. Such contrived authenticity reaches its peak in his recent Travelers among Mountains and Streams (2014), a work in his Artificial Wonderland series. This monumental photo collage 'copies' Fan Kuan (c. 960–1030)'s masterpiece[5] so meticulously that even a skilled painter could hardly match its verisimilitude – the progression from dark to light shades of ink is precisely reproduced, the electric towers on the top of the hills echo the shapes and arrangements of the pines in the painting, even the distinctive diagonal *cun* thrust of the rock on the left foreground is captured in a corresponding pile of debris. The only 'missing' component, curiously, are the tiny human figures and cattle in the foreground. In fact, this complete absence of humans – or anything organic and alive – is a consistent feature in all of Yang's collaged landscapes. Such absence calls attention to the utter artificiality of the pictorial scheme: while Fan Kuan's original suggests – deceptively – that human presence is dwarfed by the sublimity of nature, human interference is at once omnipresent and invisible in Yang's.

Yang is not the only Chinese contemporary artist who uses decisively modern and unnatural materials to fabricate deceptively real scenes of *shanshui*. The Beijing-based artist Yao Lu (b. 1967) also assembles actual photographs of construction debris he sees in his surroundings, which are often covered in blue, green or brown protection nets, with readymade images of

5. Currently at the National Palace Museum in Taipei, available in high resolution at http://theme.npm.edu.tw/selection/Article.aspx?sNo=04000959&lang=2, accessed 30 November 2015.

Figure 2: Yang Yongliang (b. 1980), Phantom Landscape I, No. 3*, 2006. Epson Ultragiclee Print on Epson fine art paper, 60 x 160cm.*

Figure 3: Yang Yongliang (b. 1980), Artificial Wonderland II: Travelers Among Mountains and Steams*, 2014. Epson Ultragiclee Print on Kodak Duratrans paper, 150 x 300cm.*

trees, pavilions, clouds and waterfalls to make green-blue (*qinglü*) *shanshui* images – a type of landscape that was invented in Tang dynasty and adopted in later ages for its archaism. Most of Yao's remakes, entitled *New Landscape*, are not direct imitation of particular pieces, but they look unmistakably 'traditional', with clear layering of foreground, middle ground and background, subtle balance between full and emptiness, spare yet strategic placement of architectural elements, and plenty of clouds and mist. The folds and drapery of the protection nets also give the mountains an interesting variety of textures, from smooth and sweeping to crumbling and splitting, which is a trademark of traditional *shanshui*.

Figure 4: Yao Lu (b. 1967). Viewing the Waterfall from the Pine Rocks*, 2007. Chromogenic print, 47 ¼ x 47 ¼ inches.*

Like Yang Yongliang's urban landscapes, the illusion of nature in Yao's collage starts to dissemble upon close inspection. The debris is glaringly obvious wherever the nets open, and the images are dotted with construction signs, painted slogans, furnaces blowing smoke or human figures in uniforms of labourers or cadres. But curiously, the intrusion of modernity does not necessarily turn the traditional composition into a grotesque mockery. In fact, many of them fit in quite harmoniously: the smoke from furnaces resembles chimney smoke (*chuiyan*), a symbol of pastoral charm celebrated in classical Chinese poetry; the rubbles of cement slabs, adorned with a pavilion, a waterfall and surrounded with mist, has the rugged beauty of craggy hills; the human figures, isolated and grey, can be mistaken for hermit poets that roam in traditional *shanshui* paintings. Such unexpected compatibility is even more striking in Yao's *New Landscapes* (2009–11), in which he incorporates more modern elements – passing trains blowing torpedoes of smoke, stretches of cityscape on an island made of debris, groups of human figures skating in an ice rink – into more apparently 'traditional' format of *shanshui*: meticulously structured compositions that guide the viewer's gaze through the handscroll; a large portion of elegant calligraphy that praises the scenery; colophons that comment on how the work was made. From a distance, the work looks more *shanshui*-esque than ever.

Created in the midst of the construction frenzy before the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Yao Lu's *shanshui* clearly comment on the waste and pollution of modern Chinese cities. As critics readily point out and Yang frequently acknowledges himself, Yang's *Phantom Landscapes* also serve as a powerful critique of environmental damages brought by over-development (Tai 2010). In addition, critics have commented on how Yang and Yao's works enhance

and reinvigorate the traditional *shanshui* paintings, how they present the clashes as well as potential harmonies between the past and the present, the East and the West, or how they negotiate between the elite literati conventions and the equally problematic 'realism' exemplified by photography (Yin 2011). Little has been said, however, on how such works question the very conception of 'nature' and its associated aesthetics, as perceived in reality and construed in *shanshui* paintings. Jan Stuart, a curator at the British Museum, wisely points out the aesthetic appeal of those constructed urbanscapes:

> By making his (Yang's) works 'beautiful' they are much more than a mockery of modern life. Instead they subtly pose the difficult question of whether urban life can be simultaneously loathsome and threatening of the established order, while still perhaps possessing its own kind of intrinsic beauty and desirably lifestyle.
>
> (2013: 9)

The beauty manifested in Yang and Yao's works, however, is not really 'intrinsic': it is shaped by the art of landscape painting itself. Often seen as a medium to capture, with increasing truthfulness and delicacy, the inspiring sceneries crafted by natural forces, it is in fact a highly conventionalized schemata that selects and composes objects of the material world in a way that shapes and conforms to our preconceptions of the sublime and the picturesque. In other words, what makes landscape beautiful is not its content, but its *form*, in which every element is regulated (though not impervious to changes and innovations) and invested with symbolic significance. In the Chinese tradition, mountains will look attractive and 'natural' when they are portrayed in certain textures (*cun*), colours (shades of black and grey or mineral green-blue), and with a specific set of accessories (mist, pavilions, sparsely leafed trees, seals and calligraphy, and so on); even when the viewer realizes that the 'mountains and waters' are made of materials that are antithetic to the pastoral sentiments expressed by their paradigms, the mesmerizing power of the form still holds.

While traditional landscape paintings invariably highlight their optical or 'spiritual' verisimilitude to unspoiled nature, the landscapes of Yang and Yao bring the artificiality of their wonderland to the foreground, hence remind us that the 'nature' we perceive and inhabit today – as well as in the past – is constructed and fundamentally conceptual. The charm we attribute to nature, therefore, is precisely due to such conceptual presumptions. On the other hand, their landscapes do contain enough portrayals of urban congestion, ecological hazard and impending environmental crisis to draw the viewers' attention away from aesthetic contemplations. Some of Yang's works feature rising tides, cities crumbling and half submerged in water, or even charts showing evidence of global warming, and the enchanting mists in Yao's *shanshui* seem to have risen from trash burning or fumigation. The very fact that such alarming scenarios blend well with the conventionally shaped 'nature' may suggest the most urgent reasons why we should protect the environment today: not to preserve a pristine, undisturbed nature, which has ceased to exist a long time ago, but to keep the irreversibly anthropocene world of ours suitable for human inhabitation.

THE NATURAL AND THE ARTIFICIAL: A UTOPIA OF STONES

Similar to Yang and Yao's *shanshui* collages, the 'scholar's rocks' of Zhan Wang (b. 1962) and Zhang Jianjun (b. 1970) highlight the artificiality of what is conventionally seen as 'natural'. Displayed individually, piled up into small hills, or featured in paintings, the scholar's rock has been a key component of the Chinese elites' evocation of nature for millenniums, and the connoisseurship of rocks reached a peak under the Northern Song Emperor Huizong (1082–1135), who constructed enormous mountains of rocks in his imperial gardens. Limestone from the Tai Lake of Suzhou is preferred (although several other types also came to prominence intermittently), and rocks that appear 'wrinkled, perforated, lean and translucent' (*zhou, lou, shou, tou*) are prized the highest. Similar to that of landscape paintings, the aesthetics of scholar's rocks are fraught with symbolisms that are at once metaphysical and sociopolitical. Its cavernous shape facilitates the circulation of the cosmic energy *qi* and invites the residence of Buddhist as well as Taoist immortals; its lean, wrinkled look echoes the inked mountains in literati paintings, which in turn may embody the stoic integrity of the literati (when alone) or a social hierarchy governed by moralistic principles (when in groups); the isomorphic rocks resonate and compliment with human bodies; even their mineral components are believed to have healing qualities (Hay 1985; Little 1999). As the collection of unique rocks (*qishi*) became a crucial mark of taste in Ming dynasty, connoisseurship and ownership of notable pieces also became a competitive game, with books such as *Stone Manual of the Su Garden* (*Suyuan shipu*, first published in 1613) serving as guidance for the aspiring elites.[6]

Zhan Wang's *New Stone Manual of Su Garden* (2008), in which he introduces his series of 'scholar's rocks' in great detail, clearly links his own creations to the long history of stone maniacs. Yet he acknowledges that his early pieces were conceived in a context that had little to do with the literati tradition. His first stainless steel rock (1995) took after a model he picked from a construction site and bore no resemblance to the scholar's rocks; its mirror-like surface, which took him painstaking effort to produce, was inspired by Jeff Koon's 'vulgar', glossy works (Zhan 2008: 25). Even as Zhan started to imitate the shape and texture of scholar's rocks, he continues to envision the stones in a context that is global as well as 'traditional'. The complex web of 'holes' in the stone, for example, echoes modern abstract sculptures by the likes of Jean Arp and Henry Moore (Zhan 2008: 31–32). Britta Erickson also points out that Zhan's rocks developed from his earlier interests in reproduction and abstraction, manifested in his *Temptation* series (1994), as well as from his attention to forced demolishment and urban ruins, prompted by the destruction of his own studio at The Central Academy of Fine Art in 1994 (Erickson 2004).

However, as Zhan's rocks gained recognition, their connection with the traditional scholar's rocks became the focal point: while the former are exact replicates of the latter in terms of shape and (to a less degree) texture, the materials are the exact opposite, hence creating intriguing contrasts between the primordial and the industrial, the natural and the artificial, the elite and the commercial, the traditional and the (post)modern. The contrasts can be interpreted in multiple and often conflicting ways. Hou Hanru argues that Zhan's 'vulgarization' of scholar's rocks mocks the cheap, ostentatious and mediocre 'national characteristics' that pervade modern Chinese architecture

6. Manuals on rocks were already composed in Tang and Song dynasty, such as Bai Juyi's *Taihu shi ji*, Du Shao's *Yunlin shipu* and Fan Chengda's *Taihu shi zhi*. But such books proliferated and circulated widely in Ming and Qing, accompanying a flourishing material culture (Clunas 1991).

7. Zhan's rocks, for example, are the only pieces of artworks featured in *Louis Vuitton Voyages*, a blockbuster exhibition at the National Museum of China in Beijing in 2011.

(Hou 1999), while Fan Di'an contends that they suit modern cities much better than the traditional ones, and that they may even interact and 'intervene' with their environments (2008). The interaction and intervention come primarily from its mirror-like surface that reflects its surroundings: placed in gardens or above waters, Zhan's rocks appear green and 'organic'; placed inside or next to modern skyscrapers, they enhance and harmonize the glass and steel bodies of those buildings. Looking at those artificial rocks, one may realize that the feeling of being 'natural' does not exclude human interventions; as long as the space one inhabits contains both coherence and variation in an aesthetically pleasing manner, it could be perceived as being natural.

More importantly, Zhan's glossy 'rocks' compel the viewers to reevaluate the nature evoked by traditional scholar's rocks. The artist has remarked himself,

> (My works) look like a modification to the concept of 'natural-born.' In fact, what has been modified is only the surface; the space inside is still the shape of natural rocks. Therefore, although the stainless steel is 'false' on its surface, its inside is still natural. It's the 'real' in disguise, because the real nature has already become a void, while the false surface has regained visual reality in modernized cities, just like the status of natural stones in traditional gardens.
>
> (Zhan 2008: 10–11)

Evidently, 'visual reality' could be more visible than material reality – or even overtake it. As I elaborated earlier, the traditional scholar's rocks are by no means 'natural' – if the word indicates pristine, unaltered existence. Not only were they selected, framed and, in some cases, cultivated or modified to better suit the literati taste, but they were also so infused with layers of meanings that their material reality became secondary. In other words, the nature they represent is fundamentally artificial. To place such contrived 'nature' in a modern and industrial environment, therefore, is doubly alienating; the stainless steel ones, in comparison, are far more 'natural' with this surroundings.

Twenty years after its first invention, Zhan Wang's rocks have gone from avant-garde to mainstream: not only have they been bought by major museums and private collectors all over the world, they have also constituted a solo exhibition at the normally conservative National Art Museum in anticipation of the Beijing Olympics, occupied numerous commercial space from shopping malls to high-end hotels, and become a most common showpiece of Chinese avant-garde art when such art is featured as an accessory for luxury goods.[7] Its aesthetic merits alone cannot explain such popularity: its sleek, platinum-like appearance caters to the fetishism of ordinary consumers and campy connoisseurs alike (Gao 2002) – just like Jeff Koon's works do; seeing one's own reflections in those 'rocks' also satisfy the narcissism of contemporary museum-goers, many of whom can be seen taking pictures of themselves in front of the piece – in an era before selfies-taking became a common practice. Ironically, despite its drastically different aesthetics, fetishism and narcissism also played an important role in the culture of traditional scholar's rocks, as reflected in the astronomical prices of rare rocks, and in the common practice of collecting isomorphic rocks and claiming them as reflections of the gentleman owner's selfhood (Hay 1985: 32–35; Little 1999: 24).

In comparison, Zhang Jianjun's artificial rocks are much less known.[8] His earlier works, entitled *Sumi Garden of Recreation* (2002), were made of sumi-ink, which looked strikingly similar to the 'real' scholar's rocks and, in terms of aesthetics, even more steeped in the literati tradition. Placed in a pool of water, those rocks dissolve in a few days, making Zhang's work at once ephemeral and permanent – as the solid form turns into diluted ink that can be used for writings. His later *Mirage Garden* (2006), however, exhibits a postmodern sensibility that nevertheless differs from that of Zhan Wang: made of bright-coloured silicone, they look both flashier and plainer than Zhan's stainless steel pieces. Their artificiality is unmistakable, though more grotesque than alluring. Instead of real water (as he did for the sumi-ink pieces), Zhang exhibited his silicone rocks on 'water' that is even more codified and artificial – the character *shui* (water) painted in picturesque forms and layered with diluted ink. To use Chinese characters as images was far from new,[9] yet Zhang's juxtaposition of the modern and the traditional is particularly poignant: neither the silicone 'mountain' nor the pictographic 'water' has anything to do with the material reality of nature, yet both can signify nature, due to the meaning they acquired in conventional aesthetics and semiotics. In combination, they become a 'landscape' (*shanshui*) in which nature is at once evoked and dissembled.

The unmistakable yet less glamorous artificiality of Zhang's silicone rocks can make a stronger (though perhaps less intriguing) statement regarding the natural and the man-made. In *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, December 2013–April 2014), the curator Maxwell Hearn chose to install Zhang's rock in the Astor Court in place of the original rocks, despite the fact that Zhan Wang's rocks are much better known – and was in fact the first piece of contemporary Chinese art the Met acquired, by Hearn himself. The choice may have to do with the size of the rocks or the curator's wish to include less recognizable works, but the most important reason might be that the

8. Prior to the 2014 Met exhibition *Ink Art*, of which I will discuss later, Zhang's rocks were only featured in one book-length catalogue, *Zhang Jian-jun* (Singapore: iPRECIATION, 2007).

9. The Chinese artists Gu Wenda, Xu Bing and Qiu Zhijie, among others, have created works of such nature in the 1980s and 1990s.

Figure 5: Zhang Jianjun (b. 1970), Scholar's Rock (Mirage Garden)*, 2008. Silicone rubber. The Astor Court, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.*

purple silicone rock appears more dissonant and 'unnatural' in such a surrounding, hence drawing attention to the contrived nature of the Astor Court itself: constructed meticulously to replicate the famed Garden of the Master of the Fishing Nets in Suzhou, it was meant to provide an authentic version of a most cherished Chinese tradition as well as an oasis of refined nature in the middle of ultimate urbanity (Murck and Fong [1980] 1981). To numerous visitors, it has indeed served such a purpose, but is it not also a perfect example of the 'forceful interference of landscape' to which Jia Baoyu objected centuries ago?

SURREAL CITIES, SIMULATED LANDSCAPES

The *shanshui* assembled by Yang and Yao appear deceptively organic when looked from afar, and the gardens constructed with the rocks of Zhan and Zhang still evoke nature, albeit in alienated forms. The 'landscapes' in Miao Xiaochun's (b. 1964) *New Urban Reality* series (2003–06), on the other hand, seem to be as distant from the conventionally defined nature as one could imagine. As the title suggests, those photographs are made of typical scenes of Chinese cities today: construction sites, skyscrapers, architectural landmarks, flashy stores and restaurants, and heavily congested streets, in which one could barely spot a tree. The images are sharp in quality, mundane in content, and panoramic in format, yet they start looking eerie when one compares them with 'real' panoramic photographs: there is no warp of the scene and (oftentimes) no receding of space; all the details are equally crisp and close-up, laid out 'flat' and horizontally. Any experienced photographer would be able to tell that each picture is in fact made of multiple shots from varying distances and angles, digitally manipulated to form a seemingly continuous and unified image.

Miao achieves such contrived continuity by adopting the perspective and (to a lesser degree) format of traditional Chinese scroll paintings – an experiment he started when he studied at the Kunsthochschule Kassel in Germany. In *On Herkules* (1999), a work in his earlier series *A Visitor of the Past* (1999–2004), he modifies a stately view of the famous monument in Kassel, turning it into a 'hanging scroll' that unfolds vertically and contains clearly demarcated front, middle and backgrounds. In his later works, he uses the hand-scroll format much more frequently, and almost exclusively to portray urban scenes, such as *Advertise* (2001) and *Restaurant* (2001), two other works in the same series. The choice is hardly surprising. As Miao explains in an interview, the 'scattered perspectives' (*sandian toushi*)

Figure 6: Miao Xiaochun (b. 1964), Fashion, *from* New Urban Reality *series, 2004. Lamda print, 80 x 313cm.*

of traditional Chinese paintings contains more frames than a 'scientifically correct' picture of linear perspective and one vanishing point. Horizontally, it compels the viewer to shift her gaze and to 'read' the image in a sequence; vertically, it makes the size of individual objects more true to their relative sizes in reality (the mountain is bigger than the temples, which in turn are bigger than trees and human figures, etc.) so that those in the foreground will not block those at the back. Such arrangement allows an 'encyclopaedic' view in a single image, both temporally and spatially (Wu 2004) – as if you were walking through the scene or watching it through a moving camera. Traditional Chinese painting of urban landscapes, exemplified by the Northern Song masterpiece *Along the River during the Qingming Festival* (*Qingming shanghe tu*) and its numerous epigones, are primarily based on this compositional scheme.[10]

The 'encyclopaedic' vision is instrumental to what Miao wants to convey in his photographs. It provides an all-encompassing view without sacrificing the subtlety of minute details, which makes the scene look hyper-real despite its apparent absurdity; also, without a central focus, the viewer is compelled to see that the paralleled 'frames' are equally significant and present, no matter how uncanny the juxtaposition appears. In *Spring Festival* (2002), a crumbling, graffiti-covered wall – topped with an improbable Corinthian capital – divides the space into two alleys. One side features a typical apartment building in urban China, with an unadorned, eroded concrete façade; the other, however, contains a similar façade 'decorated' with a plethora of reliefs and murals of Roman, Renaissance, Islamic as well as Chinese origins. A bearded man in a Taoist robe – a recurring figure in the entire series of *A Visitor from the Past* – watches the Chinese residents go about their daily lives, aware of neither his presence nor the surreal surroundings. In *Transmission* (2002), the juxtaposition of incongruous time and space is subtler yet equally striking, with the mysterious Taoist gentleman facing a rural, idyllic landscape on the left, two boys running with toy guns in the shallow alley at the middle, and a fashionably attired girl texting on her cell phone on the right corner. Wu Hung argues that the constructed pictorial space makes such images 'incoherent and even absurd', turning them into 'phantasmagoria' (Wu 2004: 23). But in fact, despite the skewed space, the photographs look fairly realistic to untrained eyes; the incoherent content and thrusting angles also captures the wildly eclectic, rapidly changing reality in contemporary China in a way that feels palpably real. In a way, this is the 'natural' environment people reside in nowadays, where the traditional

10. The original *Qingming shanghe tu* is located at the Palace Museum in Beijing, while its most famous epigones by Tang Yin and court painters of Qing are at the National Palace Museum in Taipei. Miao, however, does not seem to emulate the compositional scheme of any particular handscroll too closely, but instead follows the perspectival principles of traditional land/urbanscape, as interpreted by himself.

Figure 7: Miao Xiaochun (b. 1964), Transmission*, from* A Visitor from the Past *series, 2002. Digital C-print, 70 x 291cm.*

and the modern, the native and the foreign, the authentic and the fake blend ceaselessly and almost imperceptibly.

Compared with *A Visitor from the Past*, the photographs in *New Urban Reality* series no longer contain any apparently surreal components: the ghostly gentleman is gone; all the scenes are mundane and plausible, though clearly manipulated. They also grow even flatter and more unfocused: all details are similarly distanced and proportioned, and most images have no vanishing point at all. One may say that they resemble the traditional landscapes in handscroll format more than ever. However, the images convey a sensation of the fantastic that is even more profoundly alienating than before – a sensation, I would argue, that comes from the thoroughly equal and seemingly indifferent treatment of the real and the represented, the living and the simulacra, the 'natural' and the artificial. In *Fashion* and *Await* (2004), for example, the street crowd takes up just as much space and keeps just as much distance as the gigantic billboard next to them; the women or the cell phone on the billboard, being larger, more distinctive and colourful, also seem more vividly alive than the 'real' people. The contrast between the lifestyle promised in those commercials and what is actually lived is sharper and more ironic than ever. In some of the later works, the artificial takes over almost entirely, squeezing the organic and the alive to the margin – or even turning them into part of the mechanical. In *Surplus* (2007), the distinctly modern and 'western' KTV on the left is just as ostentatious, contrived – and strangely mesmerizing – as the more Chinese-styled restaurant on the right, while the people inside and in front of them seem to have merged into the buildings. The pedestrians moving in the foreground of *Orbit* (2005) have the same streamlined linearity – and anonymity – as the buses, cars and buildings, all of which divided clearly into 'three distances' and lined up in strict horizontality. The varying speed of vehicles in different lanes, arbitrarily assigned, indicates incongruous temporality. Again, the scheme conventionally used to render mountains and waters is adopted – almost imperceptibly – to render subject matters alien to traditional aesthetics, producing an effect that is hyper-real

Figure 8: Miao Xiaochun (b. 1965), Orbit, *from* New Urban Reality *series, 2005. Digital C-print, 85 x 189 inches.*

in details, deliberate in composition, familiar at the first sight yet eerily surreal upon closer examination.

Miao is neither the only nor the first artist who uses the traditional landscape scheme to present 'unnatural' objects, yet the fascinating tension between the real and surreal in Miao's photographs is exceptional. Xing Danwen (b. 1967) composed two handscrolls (*Scroll*, 1999–2000) with black-and-white photographs of, respectively, people enjoying their leisure time and traditional-style residential houses, observed from different angles. Hong Hao (b. 1965) produces modernized versions of *Qingming shanghe tu* by assembling contemporary photographs of Beijing in similar orders (2000–01). Hong Lei (b. 1960) 'remade' Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322)'s famous *Autumn Colors of Qiao and Hua Mountains* (*Qiao hua qiuse tu*) with photographs taken from a mining town, replacing the iconic mountains with a gigantic pile of coal and a steam factory (2003). All those works experiment with the scattered perspective and the horizontal format, yet the individual 'frames' do not form a deceptively continuous panorama.[11] The fragmentation of those images, of course, is intentional,[12] although it may also have to do with the fact that they were made in an era when digital manipulation was still a new and unfamiliar technique for Chinese artists. While those 'broken' images highlight the limitations of the 'realism' exemplified by photography and perhaps dramatize the clashes between the traditional format and the modern content, the well-hidden manipulation of Miao's works suggests that the overwrought artificiality and simulacra we inhabit today can still be 'naturalized' by familiar aesthetics in ways that are comparable to and perhaps more thorough than landscape art of the past, in which the pastoral and the wild were 'recognized', selected and codified into visual types. Baudrillard has argued that, previously, images may have reflected, masked or perverted 'a basic reality', but in the postmodern society, they 'mask the *absence* of a basic reality' (original emphasis) or even become entirely self-generating and 'bear no relations to any reality whatever' (1983: 13). Apt as the description seems when applied to Miao's works, Baudrillard's division between 'reality' and images is in fact arbitrary: after all, could the former register with human consciousness without the latter? In other words, can we see 'nature' without the visual expectations shaped by the art of landscape?

The urban scenes in Miao's photographs might be 'naturalized' and appealing, yet they also contain a critical edge – not only towards the world of homogenizing commercialism and simulacra, but also towards a society where inequality is glaringly obvious. The juxtaposition of glamorous

11. Hong Lei's *Qiao hua qiuse tu* is the most continuous one, with the gaps between frames smoothed out digitally. But the skewed scales of individual objects and sharp zigzag of the ground makes it obvious that the photograph is assembled.

12. Xing Danwen explains that she kept the overlaps and leaked lights among and between frames, so that the creative process is visible. Hong Hao's *Qingming shanghe tu* remakes were even more obviously fragmented; some editions were made of photographs taken in a moving car, with the rear mirror in view.

Figure 9: Miao Xiaochun (b. 1965), Du Fu, *from* New Urban Reality *series, 2006. Digital C-print.*

advertisements and humble daily life already demonstrates this; but the message could be even harsher in the rest of the series. The images featuring skyscrapers and construction sites in *New Urban Reality* tend to have more depth, with the site of demolishment occupying more space and gaping like an open wound. In contrast, the sleek new buildings are remote and mirage-like. Several works show the recent architectural highlights of Beijing, including the 'Bird's Nest' and 'Water Cube' stadiums for the 2008 Olympics, and the 'Giant Egg' opera house (*Theatre, Nest* and *Stand*). Yet they are invariably pushed to the background, shielded and obscured by chaotic construction sites, commercial posters, or a mundane street scene, with crumbling old buildings and pedestrians paying no attention to the spectacle. *Du Fu* and *Li Bai* probably convey the most direct criticism. With half-torn slums in the front and gleaming high-rises at the back, the former clearly refers to the Tang poet Du Fu's famous verse from *Song of My Cottage Unroofed by Autumn Gales*, in which he laments the shabby shelters of the poor and wishes for 'a grand mansion with a thousand, ten thousand rooms' (*guang xia qian wan jian*) to house them all. The latter shows two gigantic factory chimneys blowing smoke at the back – with a tiny pagoda awkwardly huddled in between – and a foaming, polluted river in the front, hence evokes Li Bai's poem on the waterfall at Mount Lu, which starts with 'the Incense Summit, aglow in smoke and steam', and ends with comparing the waterfall to 'the milky way, falling from heaven supreme'. Both images feature a lonesome man in the dystopian landscape, whose face remains invisible, and whose existence seems precarious. The poetic is replaced with the prosaic, the picturesque with the ironic; what is lost in the process, however, is not the abstract 'nature' and all its conventional beauty, but a world where the ordinary humans can live with security and dignity.

CONCLUSION: THE AESTHETICS OF NATURE, REDEFINED

All the artists discussed in my article carefully link their landscapes with the – long and exceedingly complex – Chinese aesthetic tradition of portraying nature, yet their works question, dissemble and subvert the conventional and clichéd interpretation of this tradition, revealing that schemata, artificiality and human intervention were always integral to the representation and visualization of landscapes in China. Yang Yongliang and Yao Lu's city-*shanshui*, being at once picturesque and catastrophic, demonstrate that the aesthetics of depicting nature has little to do with its actual components. Zhan Wang and Zhang Jianjun's rocks, combining the prototypes that conventionally embody nature and the glaringly artificial materials, show that the perception of being natural has always been derived from the contrived and the conceptual. Finally, Miao Xiaochun's cityscapes, devoid of direct portrayals of nature yet constructed by the same rules of composition, show that even the utmost artificiality can be naturalized into familiar and appealing imagery. Overall, those works illustrate the human-centred process in the envisioning, categorizing, interpreting and shaping of the environment; some also suggest that the ecological crisis we are facing today is fundamentally a social crisis, created by ruthless exploitation and gross inequality.

In an era when 'forcible interference with the landscape' has long become the norm, can landscape art still portray nature? If so, in what shapes and forms? The question obviously can have many answers,

but to create yet another pastoral utopia seems no longer an option. As the pioneers of ecocriticism have pointed out, the metaphors we use for nature influence the way we treat it (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996: xix), and despite all our efforts to deconstruct the anthropocene perspective, we will never get away from metaphors and see the world around us with innocent eyes. Recent ecological art, many of which are communal and interventional, tend to highlight – and, to a degree, re-envision and reshape – human presence in the broader environment, through the creation of new metaphors and, consequently, new landscapes.[13] In those works, nature and civilization no longer stand on the opposite sides of the spectrum, but interweave and integrate with each other – with imbalance, incongruity and sometimes violent clashes, but also with moments of joy, inspiration and mutual nourishment.

13. Many of such works are documented in great detail online, see for example http://awallproject.net/, which introduces five projects from Greater China, https://artproject4wetland.wordpress.com/, the site for Cheng-Long Wetland International Environmental Art Project, hosted annually since 2010 in Taiwan, and the Echigo-Tsumari Art Field at Satoyama, Japan (http://www.echigo-tsumari.jp/eng/), with a Triennale established in 2015.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Tan, C. (2016), 'Landscape without nature: Ecological reflections in contemporary Chinese art', *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art,* 3: 3, pp. 223–41, doi: 10.1386/jcca.3.3.223_1

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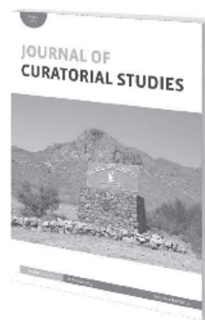
Journal of Curatorial Studies

ISSN: 20455836 | Online ISSN: 20455844
3 issues per volume | Volume 2, 2013



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