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WONDERMOUNTAIN

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PENRITH REGIONAL GALLERY
& THE LEWERS BEQUEST



LANDSCAPES OF ARTIFICE AND THE IMAGINATION

DRIVING WESTBOUND ON SYDNEY'S M₄ MOTORWAY, AT EASTERN CREEK, A COMPLEX JUNGLE OF OVERPASSES RISE OUT OF THE FLAT WESTERN PLAINS. THE LIGHT HORSE INTERCHANGE CONNECTS THE CITY'S MAJOR ARTERIAL MOTORWAYS (THE M₇, M₄, M₂ AND M₅) AND WAS OPENED IN 2005 TO SERVICE THE GROWING POPULATION AND ECONOMIES OF SYDNEY'S OUTER SUBURBS. RIBBONS OF CONCRETE AND STEEL, BRIDGES AND RAMPS, ARE PUNCTUATED WITH SCULPTURAL MONUMENTS TO THE LIGHT HORSE BRIGADE WHO SERVED IN WWI AND ONCE TRAINED IN THE AREA.



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Yang Yongliang (杨永良), *Phantom Landscape*, 2010, (still), colour DVD, sound, ed. 4/5, 3 min 23 sec. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.
Purchased NGV Foundation, 2011. Image courtesy the artist

A spectacle of public art crossed with gargantuan feats of engineering—this structure would not be out of place in the Chinese megacities of Shanghai or Chongqing. A passage of movement where nobody crosses anybody else's path, the Light Horse Interchange brings to mind less the ANZAC spirit and more the transient spaces of supermodernity: or 'non-places'.¹ Non-places challenge conventional patterns of time and space, social interactions, history and identity: those escalators, motorways, supermarkets, hotels, leisure parks and airports that could be situated anywhere in the world.

If supermodernity's non-places signal technology's command over the natural environment, the monumental mountainscapes of traditional Chinese landscape painting attempt precisely the opposite. Chinese landscape painting, or *shanshui* (山水), is a poetic approach to imaging landscapes that has evolved since the Tang Dynasty (618 – 906). Historically the domain of the literati poet-painters of imperial China, *shanshui* can be characterised by its ink and wash technique; embrace of negative space; muted colour palette; fluid, expressive mark-making and the absence of the human figure and elevation of natural forms.

Chinese landscape painting is unique in the way that it synthesises textual and pictorial elements. The white voids of *shanshui* are typically overwritten with poetry, commenting on the inner spirit of the subject at hand. Heavily influenced by Taoist and Confucian philosophies, *shanshui*'s tranquil scenes

communicate the epic power of the natural world and people's harmonious attitude toward this. The genre's strange peaks and cliffs, misty waterfalls and forests of twisted pine are fluid forms that exist without place or time—landscapes that are entirely imagined.

*I have decided to portray this theme [Mt Tiantai] according to my own imagination. I have heard that some of the strange pine trees on the mountain have met the sad fate of extinction. It seems that once the natural wonders of the sky, earth, mountains and rivers are exposed to the intimate scrutiny of our dusty world they do not last long. This indeed is a cause for lamentation.*²

Dai Benxiao (戴本孝) (1621 – 91)

For the thirteen Australian and Chinese artists exhibited in *Wondermountain*, many of whom travel and work across the Asia Pacific, the non-places of both supermodernity and Chinese art history are equally familiar. These are artists who operate transculturally, their contemporaries not defined by geographic locale, but by shared aesthetics, concerns and uncertainties.

Through painting, installation, drawing, sculpture, photography and the moving image, *Wondermountain* visualises landscapes devoid of place. In Yang Yongliang's (杨永良) haunting animation a Song Dynasty (960 – 1279) composition is populated by hundreds of skyscrapers, cranes and pylons in a complex dystopian vision. In a similar act of subverting the sublime, Philjames transforms a found

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picturesque landscape painting into an image of China’s controversial Three Gorges Dam, dwarfing the original pavilion in the foreground. Both artists skilfully co-opt a pre-existing visual language to pass comment on the scale and pace of development in contemporary China.

Jamie North investigates the material relationship between the natural and human-made, encasing growths of Australian native plant-life in an elegant column of concrete, coal ash, steel slag and iron oxide. Also experimenting with industrial detritus, Aesha Henderson’s installation—a mass of repurposed and fabricated concrete and rubble—openly comments on the transformative and lasting affect of humans on the landscape in a three-dimensional speculation of what we might leave behind. Executed in brick-fragments and gold leaf, Jason Wing’s contribution is a direct response to his experience of Xucun, a 2000 year old village in remote Shanxi Province, where traditional ways of living face continuous threat from the vicissitudes of urban developers and mining.

Working site-specifically, Li Ming (李明) uses video to document a series of aural interventions, as his retrofitted loudspeaker blasts a villain’s laugh into a sleepy mountainside town. The result is both humorous and sinister as Li’s work hints at some kind of impending doom. Similarly, the ink and brush drawings of Cindy Yuen-Zhe Chen articulate the invisible through a direct engagement with space. A response to the sounds of the Nepean River and gardens of Penrith Regional Gallery & The Lewers Bequest, Chen’s abstracted soundscape investigates the spatial dimensions of Chinese landscape painting and the fluidity and fragility of the river ecosystem.

On the streets of Foshan, Guangdong Province, Hua Tunan (画图男) paints the unreal landscapes of *shanshui* in bursts of colour and movement. His bold palette and splatters of paint confront the ‘bland’ aesthetic and serene mood typically associated with the genre in a nod to the many vibrant hues of contemporary life in China. For *Wondermountain*, Hua has produced a specially commissioned fluorescent *shanshui* mural in the Gallery and gardens.

Deceptively rendered as academic-style oil paintings, Wang Zhibo (王之博) imagines gardens that are entirely artificial. Wang’s parkscapes draw elements from both classical Chinese and European landscaping and architecture. The spaces that result are neither here nor there, evoking a quietly discomfoting mood of eeriness and abandonment. Svetlana Bailey’s fog-filled photographs of Chinese leisure parks obscure any semblance of place, elevating her mysterious subjects into an otherworldly realm akin to the mist-shrouded peaks of *shanshui*. Also working in photo-media Shoufay Derz documents the scattering of ashes onto the mountainscape of Taiwan’s Caoshan (also known as ‘moonworld’), altering the landscape through ritual-like performance, while Liu Yuan’s (刘垣) selection of vernacular photography in mountain-like forms visually interprets the Zen Buddhist thought that a mountain is not always a mountain.

For 1500 years, Chinese painters have borrowed and blended techniques and imagery from *shanshui* of the past to express landscapes of their imagination. In the essay that follows artist, Peter Nelson, reflects on how this approach is continued in contemporary art, and his own practice. Nelson’s work reinterprets 11th century poetry and 16th century Chinese painting through 3D-printed ceramics and digital video. As a personal extension of this tradition, Nelson inserts actors—himself included—into his own landscape of exploration and self-realisation. Bringing the question of identity back in to focus, Nelson’s remix reminds us that “non-places never exist in pure form; places reconstitute themselves in it; relations are restored and resumed.”³

Through the work of a new generation of artists who embrace both formal and philosophical fragments of *shanshui*, *Wondermountain* critically contemplates the non-places of now.

Joanna Bayndrian

Curator



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Jamie North, *flume*, 2013 (detail), fibre reinforced concrete (portland cement, coal ash, steel slag, iron oxide), plant species native to Sydney, 180 x 30 x 30. Image courtesy the artist

¹ [Marc Augé, Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity \(London: Verso, 1995\)](#)

² [Quoted in Edmund Capon, I Blame Duchamp: My Life’ s Adventures in Art \(Victoria: Penguin, 2009\)](#)

³ [Augé, Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity. p. 78](#)



AN ARTIST'S VIEW

THE ENTRY POINT WAS SUPERFICIAL. A FRIEND INTRODUCED ME TO CHINESE PAINTING AND IT RESONATED WITH ME AS AN IMPORTANT LANDSCAPE TRADITION. AS AN ART STUDENT IN SYDNEY I WAS EXPERIMENTING WITH VARIOUS WAYS OF MAKING LANDSCAPE IMAGES, HOW TO ARRANGE OBJECTS AND HOW TO CREATE SPACES. LIKE ALL GOOD OBSESSIONS, IT SHIFTED FROM AN AREA OF PASSIVE CONTEMPLATION TO ONE OF SERIOUS STUDY.

In 2009, I first saw Wen Zhengming's (文征明) (1470–1559) 16th century landscape scroll *Imitating Zhao Bosu's Illustration of the Latter Red Cliff Ode* on display at the National Palace Museum in Taipei. I was travelling between artist residency programs, working with Taiwanese and Chinese artists, observing the maelstrom of China's urbanisation, and studying Chinese landscape painting. Chinese ink painting was the hook that first took me to China, and the arbitrary starting point that led me to new fields of interest and new friends across East Asia.

My five-screen video work in *Wondermountain* is a reconstruction of Wen Zhengming's scroll. The historical threads that connect this painting to my video are a sort of shorthand for my art practice between Sydney, mainland China and Taiwan over the past five years.

The scroll was painted in the late 16th century when the artist Wen Zhengming was seventy-nine years old. The narrative content of this landscape is based on two works by the renowned 11th century poet Su Shi (苏轼) (1037 – 1101). It was written after Su Shi's highly politicised expulsion from government employment in 1080. Part travel writing, part nostalgia, they recount Su Shi's drunken journeys with friends, reminiscing, as their boat drifted through the mountainous coves of the Yangtze River, where the famous Battle of The Red Cliffs was held almost

800 years earlier.⁴ The first poem opens with his optimism in facing a time-rich retirement, whereas the second descends into the melancholy of personal isolation and looming financial poverty.

"I have guests but no wine, and even if I had wine, there is no food to go along with it. The moon is white, the wind, gentle. But how can we enjoy such a fine evening?"⁵

Wen Zhengming painted his scroll 500 years after Su Shi penned these words. (Su Shi's poems had become a popular subject for artists at the time.) Wen Zhengming worked from a painting made in the 12th century by Zhao Bosu (赵伯驹) (1120–1182) – he painted in an old-fashioned style for a 16th century artist. His archaism quoted 14th century painters such as Zhao Mengfu (赵孟頫), who during the Mongol occupation of China, turned away from government society and made innovative reworkings of the distant styles of the Tang Dynasty. As an artist of the thoroughly Chinese Ming Dynasty, Wen Zhengming was also celebrating the cultural loyalty of those 14th century painters.

The artists behind these works formed esoteric personal connections between very diverse historical fragments, which I value as a similar process to that of contemporary art practice. Contemporary artists jump into some

particular point of interest, and through gradual exploration, they research historical contexts and hypothesise their own contemporary meanings. I have made a number of such jumps, and my practice uses one investigation to inform another. Just as Wen Zhengming imitated the painting of Zhao Mengfu, I have used 3D modelling to redraw Wen Zhengming's scroll, and then combine it with other languages, from utopian urban architecture to sci-fi computer games. This video work tells the story of The Lost Man and his encounter with Akan (啊看), played by Taiwanese artist Nick Kan— two characters that cross each other's paths in a historically fragmented no-place, and define themselves through gradual explorations of the landscape.

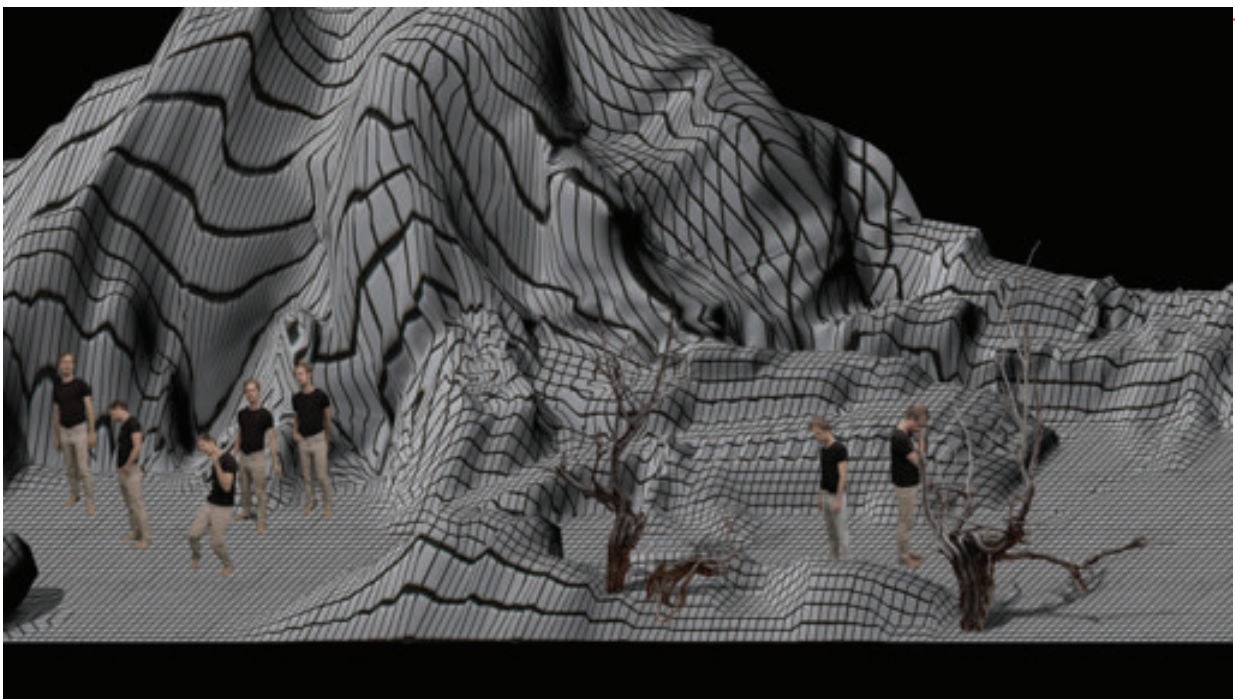
At the time of Wen Zhengming's painting, it was customary to view scrolls sitting at a desk, unrolling them one metre at a time. To protect and display these ageing works, modern museums present the entire scroll for a mass audience to view, strolling from one end to the other. Exiting the National Palace Museum, from Wen Zhengming's landscape into the Taipei metropolis, I was prompted by contrasts and co-incidences to compose my own landscape, to continue the sampling and recycling.

Peter Nelson

Artist



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 Liu Yuan, 山之形 (In the likeness of a mountain),
 2013, digital photograph, 30 x 25.5. Image courtesy the artist



^
 Peter Nelson, Extensions of a No-Place
 (文徵明), 2013, still image from five channel
 video. Image courtesy the artist



^
 Li Ming, Swordsman - HaHaHaHaHa, 2011, still from single-channel digital video
 (colour, sound), duration 3 min 27 sec. Image courtesy the artist

⁴ Li Tianming & Lin Tianren, A Thousand Churning Waves – The Legendary Red
 Cliff Heritage (National Palace Museum, 2009)

⁵ R. E. Straussburg, Inscribed Landscapes: Travel Writings from Imperial China
 (University of California Press, 1994)



^ Wang Zhibo (王之博), *Garden*, 2013, oil on linen, 187 x 200. Image courtesy Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong



^ Shoufay Derz, *Ash Upon the Moon*, 2014, pigment print on cotton rag paper, 67 x 82. Image courtesy the artist

LIST OF WORKS

(all dimensions in cm ~ h x w x d)

1.

Svetlana Bailey
13/01
2013
type-C print
editions of 8 + 2AP
120 x 150
Courtesy the artist

2.

Svetlana Bailey
13/07
2013
type-C print
editions of 8 + 2AP
120 x 150
Courtesy the artist

3.

Svetlana Bailey
13/11
2013
type-C print
editions of 8 + 2AP
120 x 150
Courtesy the artist

4.

Cindy Yuen-Zhe Chen
Soundscape: Summer Tapestry
2014
ink on Wenzhou paper
160 x 545
Courtesy the artist

5.

Shoufay Derz
Ash Upon the Moon (1- 4)
2014
pigment print on cotton rag paper
67 x 82
Courtesy the artist

6.

Aesha Henderson
What we left behind
2014
mortar, wire, pigment, found concrete
and bitumen rubble, acrylic paint
dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist

7.

Hua Tunan (画图男)
untitled
2014
spray paint on wall and canvas
dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist
Penrith Regional Gallery & The Lewers
Bequest commission

8.

Li Ming (李明)
Swordsman – HaHaHaHaHaHa
《武侠之哈哈哈哈哈》
2011
single-channel digital video (colour, sound)
4:3 duration: 3 min 27 sec
Courtesy the artist

9.

Liu Yuan (刘垣)
In the likeness of a mountain
《山之形》
2013
digital photographs
dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist

10.

Peter Nelson
Extensions of a No-Place (文徵明)
2013
mixed media installation
dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist

11.

Jamie North
Elatus
2013
fibre reinforced concrete, coal ash,
steel slag, iron oxide, various Australian
native plants including Podocarpus elatus
120 x 30 x 30
Courtesy the artist & Sarah Cottier
Gallery, Sydney

12.

Philjames
Dark Fantasy at the Three Gorges Dam
2011
oil on found painting
130 x 250
Courtesy the artist

13.

Philjames
I'd give it all for just a little bit more
2011
fibreglass
115 x 70 x 70
Courtesy the artist

14.

Wang Zhibo (王之博)
Garden
2013
oil on linen
187 x 200
Courtesy Edouard Malingue Gallery,
Hong Kong

15.

Wang Zhibo (王之博)
Untitled (Festival)
2012
oil on canvas
137 x 180
Courtesy Edouard Malingue Gallery,
Hong Kong

16.

Jason Wing
Xucun village
2014
recycled bricks, gold leaf
dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist

17.

Jason Wing
Landscape
2014
scroll
140 x 56
Courtesy the artist

18.

Yang Yongliang (杨泳梁)
Phantom Landscape
2010
colour DVD, sound, ed. 4/5
duration: 3 min 23 sec
Purchased NGV Foundation, 2011
National Gallery Victoria, Melbourne



^
Svetlana Bailey, 13/11, 2013, type-C print, 120 x 150. Image courtesy the artist

Front page: Hua Tunan (画图男), Fluorescent impression shanshui, 2013, spray paint, 300 x 500. Image courtesy the artist

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