

arts reviews

Like watching poetry in motion

Visual arts

YANG FUDONG: NO SNOW ON THE BROKEN BRIDGE

Parasol Unit Foundation for Contemporary Art
LONDON ★★☆☆

Yang Fudong has become a bit of a darling of the Western art world and has shown work at Documenta and the Venice Biennale. Born in 1971, he studied painting at the China Academy of Arts, in Hangzhou, before turning to films and videos. His photographic triptych *The First Intellectual* (2000) probed questions of idealism in a society undergoing rapid change and considered the physiological shock experienced as a result of increasing materialism.

He has claimed that Western collectors tend to think that Chinese artists make work solely with them in mind. "We do not," he says. "We do it for China." Watching his videos, I was mindful that much of the symbolism is necessarily lost on a Western audience and that our readings are all too often dependent on Western aesthetics. There

is a tendency to emphasise the painterly beauty while missing the critical edge, either through ignorance or a lack of willingness to engage with discourses from an "alien" culture.

Many of Yang Fudong's videos have an implied narrative, though they are not linear but rather elliptical, repetitive and fragmentary so that it is hard for the viewer to know exactly what is happening. His subject matter, as in *Revival of the Snake* (2005), an eight-minute colour video played simultaneously on 10 large screens, often seems archetypal.

In a desolate winter landscape, a young man, perhaps another "intellectual", dressed in what seems to be a military uniform, appears to be fighting for physical survival. Sometimes he is seen blindfolded, his arms tied behind his back, riding a white horse. Elsewhere, he appears to be wandering lost in the bleak but beautiful landscape. On one screen he hacks a hole in the ice; on another he sits huddled over a fire.

The impression of isolation and cold touches on uni-

versal feelings about the instinct for human survival, which cannot necessarily be analysed but rather understood on a visceral level.

No Snow on the Broken Bridge has been made especially for this exhibition. What is it about? Well, it is hard to say. Made in black-and-white and shown on eight screens, one set next to the other, it is imbued with a Bergmanesque sense of loss and nostalgia.

Image follows upon image in a dreamlike sequence; an open boat crosses a misty lake like something from a traditional Chinese painting; a group of young men in fedoras and smart jackets explore a beautiful rock garden. There are young women in furs and Suzi Wong-style dresses, and others with pencilled moustaches dressed in drag - and there is also a goat.

The group of men refers to the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, a group of third-century scholars who advocated individual expression and hedonism as an escape from corrupt politics; the women's glamorous clothes make explicit Yang Fudong's interest in



A Bergmanesque sense of loss and nostalgia: 'No Snow on the Broken Bridge'

1950s and 1960s cinema - a period he describes as one when there was a profound questioning of the role of the intellectual.

But knowing this does not necessarily take us any further. Rather, one has to succumb to the film's dreamlike atmosphere, to the calligraphic patterns of the reeds reflected on water or the young women dancing in slow motion on the hump-

back bridge. He may be talking about politics or society, but it is hard to know.

Meaning is not literal. The screens act like verses in a poem, juxtaposing one disparate image against another to make a sense that can be felt rather than explained.

There is an ambience of decadence, of something at an end that cannot quite be spelt out or described. Like

a petal on water, meaning seems tangible one minute then gone the next. What is left is a mood. Yang Fudong uses his painter's training to frame moments that allow us to see the world in new ways. Perception is more important than representation, the poetic more insistent than fact.

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To 9 June (020-7490 7775)