



Three Films by Yang Fudong

Fri, 4 Mar 2011 | 7:30pm

Moving Image Gallery, Singapore Art Museum at 8Q

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\$10. \$5 concession for students with valid ID, Senior Citizens and full-time NS men.

Limited seating. Tickets are available at SAM at 8Q. Please call 6332 3200 ahead for ticket availability.

One of China's most successful and influential young artists, Yang Fudong's films and photographs have been shown extensively on international platforms. The following three films by Yang Fudong are presented as part of the Artist Films series by SAM.

Backyard - Hey, Sun is Rising!

2001, China, 13 minutes

In the city and park, four men perform simultaneous, seemingly mundane acts that prompt questions about the relationship between ritual and social change.

An Estranged Paradise

2002, China, 76 minutes

Five years in the making, this meditative film of sharp and haunting imagery is set in Hangzhou, China. Rich with allusions to Jarmusch, Godard and 1930s Shanghai cinema, it is a memorable portrait of the internal and external landscapes of Chinese modernity.

Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest Part 1

2003, 30 minutes

Yang's seminal five-part masterpiece *Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest* (2003-2007) encapsulates his preoccupations with China's experience with modernity and its ambiguity toward the past and future. This first part depicts the mysterious retreat of young Chinese urbanites to the natural world, and evokes the dissonance between individuals and society, and utopia and reality.

All the films are in Mandarin with English subtitles and the screenings are rated NC16.

Essay

Yang Fudong or the Search for Poetic Truth by Marcella Beccaria

Artist Films

The Singapore Art Museum presents a series of exceptional film and video works by artists that explore the relationship between art and the moving image, and which promote dialogue and exchange on contemporary practices in visual culture.



Film still from An Estranged Paradise, 2002. © Yang Fudong, ShanghART Gallery, Marian Goodman Gallery

Yang Fudong or the Search for Poetic Truth by Marcella Beccaria

A subtle existential discomfort and the difficult relationship with contingent reality are the conditions shared by the protagonists in Yang Fudong's works in film, video, and photography. The characters investigated by the artist's eye are men and women in their twenties and thirties who belong to a generation that still shoulders the burden of choosing and defining its future. The setting that contextualises their actions is China: sometimes poetically transfigured by the artist into a place outside time, other times recognisable as contemporary China, the new economic giant that has entered the global culture of consumerism.

A self-taught director, Yang Fudong began shooting his first film, *Mosheng Tiantang* / *An Estranged Paradise* in 1997 and finalised its post-production in 2002.¹ The film is set in Hangzhou, a city that has been a source of inspiration for painters and poets and is often described in Chinese culture as "paradise" because of its wealth of picturesque settings.²

Blind to such beauty, the protagonist Zhu Zi idles away his days, despite the attentions of his fiancée and his friendship with other young women. Concerned about the constant fatigue that afflicts him, the man attempts to detect its origin. Numerous visits to doctors in the hospital offer no help and they fail to diagnose any illness. From his behaviour it emerges that his malaise is a paralysing boredom, an existential melancholy that estranges him and prevents him from maintaining any true relationship with everyday existence. His inactivity contrasts with the fleeting view of another man who appears intermittently and is filmed while he howls and moves about restlessly. This man may be insane, but unlike the protagonist he is capable of showing his reactions to life, even if these take the form of rage.

Dominated by long sequences and painterly shots – a lesson on the compositional principles of Chinese painting functions as a prologue – the film is shot in black and white and is characterised by soft lighting, an approach which the artist also adopts in subsequent films.³ Looking back over his work, Yang Fudong cites the possible influence of Chinese cinema from the 1940s, including films such as *Baqianli lu / Clouds and Moonlight Along Eight-Thousand Li Road* (1947) by *Shi Dongshan, Wuya yu maque / Crow and Sparrow* (1949) by Zheng Junli, and one of his favourite movies, *Xiao chen zhi chun / Spring Time in a Small Town* (1948) by Fei Mu. *An Estranged Paradise* also seems to reveal interesting correspondences with French Nouvelle Vague cinema of the 1960s, but the artist claims that this is an indirect coincidence, due to his recollections of brief fragments of films he viewed or he only imagined. ⁴

¹ The first draft of the screenplay, completed in November 1996, was entitled *Buxing Bei Moshengren Yanzhong / Unfortunately Predicted by Strangers*. The artist decided that the title was too pretentious and he subsequently changed it to *Mosheng tiantang / An Estranged Paradise*, in homage to the city of Hangzhou. After shooting the film in 1997, economic difficulties forced Yang Fudong to suspend work on it until 2001, when he worked on the post-production, with financial backing from Documenta, Kassel, following his invitation to participate in *Documenta 11*.

² Two of China's most celebrated poets, Bai Juyi and Su Shi, were frequently inspired by the city and its lake. Marco Polo, at the time of his visit in the late 13th century,was also charmed by the city, which went by the name Quinsai (Kinsai). Struck by the city's grandeur, paved streets, its canals and over 12,000 stone bridges beneath which large freighters could also pass, he devoted numerous pages to its description in chapter 148 of his Travels, calling it "the noblest city in the world and the finest."

³ An Estranged Paradise was shot on film that had expired four years earlier, but which the artist decided to use anyway. Although this particular technique resulted in many blurred scenes, the artist has pursued similar effects in the other black and white films he has made.

⁴ See Zhang Yaxuan, "An Interview with Yang Fudong: The Uncertain Feeling. An Estranged Paradise", interview in *Yishu. Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* (Taipei: Vol. 3, n. 3, 2004, p.91.) "Regarding cinematographic influences," Yang Fudong has said in conversation with the author, "until then I had seen truly very little European cinema. I would say that I almost knew nothing about it. Instead, possible influences might be found in Chinese cinema. At the time it was difficult to see films that were not Chinese. In reality, when I began shooting, I didn't ever even think about which filmmakers I should be studying or referencing. Now, when I look at this film again, I continue to have conflicting impressions. Sometimes I see it and appreciate it, other times I seem particularly aware of the technical problems."

An expression of a human condition that Western literature from Baudelaire to Flaubert, Svevo and Sartre, has labelled "ennui", "spleen", or "boredom" – An Estranged Paradise is not autobiographical and yet is tied to the artist's personal experience: "What I wrote in the screenplay," Yang Fudong says, "is based on the feeling I seemed to see in the people who were around me during the period I spent in Hangzhou. They were people with whom I had studied and who, about to finish their studies, found themselves facing real life and therefore having to decide what to do, whether to work their entire lives or do something else. Suddenly it seemed that, faced with reality, they might lose the grand schemes they had had before." "The protagonist Zhu Zhi," the artist continues, "represents precisely this aspect that I saw in my young contemporaries, this incapacity to bring things to resolution, to act, to create something." [. . .]

The presence of many narrative planes in the artist's work correspond to this intentional search for multiple meanings, for a positive ambiguity meant to stimulate various interpretive levels. Musing on contemporary China, Yang Fudong's work poses numerous questions, without offering the banal certainty of answers. "It seems as if the younger generation has lost its ideals. I try not to make judgments about it, but in my work I go in search of what is left of them," he stated. ⁶

Like a large epic saga, the project *Zhulin qixian / Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest*, sets out to investigate the anxieties of a new generation through a series of five independent films. "The idea of the project," the artist says, "emerged between 2001 and 2002. I wanted to set my story in the contemporary world and I wanted the protagonists to be young. My intention was to give expression to their thoughts, their feelings, to try to understand their expectations for the future." The first part, completed in 2003, takes place on Huang Shan Mountain (Yellow Mountain), a well-known site in Chinese painting and a popular tourist destination today. Enveloped in mist, the mountain described by Yang Fudong is a mysterious place, and its landscape of rocks, trees, vistas, and cliffs seems to be in a state of constant transition, following a principle already present in classical Chinese art. In non-linear fashion, the film describes the ascent of the mountain by a group of young people, two women and five men. In the prologue, the figures are seen nude, striking iconic poses, seated on the rocks. Their nudity, an element that has no place in the Chinese pictorial tradition, can be interpreted as a new beginning, a moment of spiritual rebirth and

⁵ According to Hou Hanru, a different trend is becoming common in China: "Chinese society today, with its long history of materialism, pragmatism and revolution, tends to erase all complexity and multi-layered meaning in public discourse and in culture in general. The superficial, direct and one-dimensional are replacing depth of thought. [...] Self-reflection, twisted meaning, and doubt risk becoming political crimes." Hou Hanru, "A Naked City. Curatorial Notes Around the 2000 Shanghai Biennale," in *Art AsiaPacific* (Sydney: n. 31, winter, 2001), p. 61.

⁶ S. du Bois, "Chinatussen twee generaties / Yang Fudong: China Between Two Generations," in Stedelijk Museum Bulletin, (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, n. 4-5), p. 82.

purification.⁷ Other elements in the film – the black and white blurry images, the outdated outfits, an absence of verbal exchanges – combine to emphasise a search for detachment from contingent reality.

The film is characterised by the movie camera's slow movements. Made up of drum beats and breaths, the musical accompaniment stresses the dramatic nature of certain frames of the landscape and the intense close-ups of the protagonists. Occasionally each of the young people becomes the narrating voice. Their sparse and carefully measured words, suspended between descriptions of childhood memories, expressions of anxiety about the present and future aspirations, correspond to each character's flow of thoughts. Intentionally lacking in specificity, the moment in time described by Yang is difficult to place historically, and instead there is a stress on the universal value of the quest undertaken by the group. According to the artist, "this film is atemporal. The protagonists wear clothes from the 1940s, a bit like certain photos of French intellectuals that I remember having seen on book covers. The language they use, instead, is contemporary Chinese. I want to leave a certain ambiguity, since every era has its young people."

The same event to which Yang Fudong's title directly refers is also suspended between history and legend. Because of its political implications, the story known as the *Seven Wise Men in a Bamboo Forest* was a frequent subject of commissions in ancient Chinese painting. It refers to a group of scholars, rebellious artists and poets, who, according to tradition, rejected the lessons of Confucianism, which taught that public commitment allowed the attainment of virtue. Choosing to not belong to the bureaucratic elite, this group of men preferred to lead a life of seclusion. Believing that wisdom consisted in living a life of their own choosing, they spent their days devoting themselves to the art of conversation, to poetry and music, and to an appreciation of the pleasures of food and wine.

The entire five-part film project as conceived by Yang Fudong is heralded as a crucial moment of analysis of China and the impact that the radical changes underway have on individuals and on their search for a role and an identity. "We are doing it for China," he has said. "Yang Fudong belongs to the generation of artists who have chosen to live in their country, benefiting from a renewed cultural opening and contributing

⁷ In this regard, it is interesting to note that, unlike Western traditions, the nude does not occupy a place in Chinese tradition and does not play a role in Chinese art history. According to François Jullien, classical Chinese thought favours the idea of transformation and transition from one stage to another, whereas Greek philosophy favours form. The nude, as a tangible expression of form, is therefore absent from Chinese art, while it is dominant in Greek art and the resulting western tradition. See F. Jullien, *De l'essence ou du nu*, (Paris: Seuil, 2000).

⁸ The wise men were Ruan Ji, Xi Kang, Shan Tao, Liu Ling, Ruan Xian, Xiang Xiu, and Wang Rong. For a study on the pictorial representation of the subject of the seven wise men, see, for example, E. Johnston Laing, "Neo-Taoism and the 'Seven Sages in the Bamboo Groove in Chinese Painting'," in *Artibus Asiae*, (New York: Vol. XXXVI, n. 1-2, 1974).

⁹ J. Perlez, "Casting a Fresh Eye on China With Computer, Not Ink Brush," in *The New York Times* (New York: December 3, 2003).

with their work to the transformations that are taking place. ¹⁰ An awareness of having a role to play is an integral part of his artistic reflection. "What an artist tries to do," he says, "is to work on himself, diligently, carefully, even laboriously, so that his work might have some effect. According to me, what is happening today with regard to society is the great change that one sees and perceives in various forms. This transformation relates to the mental attitude of people, the many changes in their way of thinking and their ideology. Numerous factors come into play, which first of all concern the loss of traditional values including the same *concept* of tradition. In this sense there is a loss. At the same time, the arrival and assertion of the new creates - a sort of selfish existence, an existence that doesn't have much meaning. What is lost is also the idea of living together, a collective advancement in search of a better way of life."

Marcella Beccaria is the Curator of the Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art, Turin, Italy, where she has curated a number of exhibitions and special projects focusing on the international scene. As a writer, her books include Video Art. The Castello di Rivoli Collection, and the first catalogue on Yang Fudong (2005). Additional essays by Beccaria have been published, among others, by Biennale di Venezia, Venice, Italy; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, USA; Museu Serralves, Porto, Portugal; Istanbul Biennial, Turkey; Gowett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand; Stedelijk Museum, Ghent, Belgium.

This text is adapted from a longer essay first published in the catalogue for the exhibition Yang Fudong, (2 June to 24 July 2005) at the Castello di Rivoli.

¹⁰ Unlike what is happening today, in the 1980s and 1990s many artists, including Cai Guoqiang, Chen Zhen, Gu Wenda, and Huang Yong Ping, moved to the West. Of the many essays and articles on this subject, see, for example, Hou Hanru, "Departure Lounge Art, Chinese Artists Abroad, in Art and AsiaPacific (later Art AsiaPacific) (Sydney: n. 2, 1994), pp. 36-41; M. Bertagna, "Artistes Chinois 1979-2003. De la marginalization à la reconnaissance locale / Chinese Artists 1979-2003," in Artpress, (Paris: n. 290, May, pp. 19-24); Fei Dawei, "Voyage intérieur, à propos de l'art chinois à l'étranger," in Artpress, (Paris: n. 290, May), pp. 25-29.



Film still from Backyard - Hey! Sun is Rising, 2001. © Yang Fudong, ShanghART Gallery, Marian Goodman Gallery

Yang Fudong Artist Biography

Born in 1971 in Beijing, Yang Fudong lives and works in Shanghai. He first trained as a painter in China Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou, and embarked on a career in the medium of film and video in the late 1990s. One of the most successful young Chinese artists today, he was ranked first in ArtTactic's Chinese Art Market Confidence Survey in 2009 and 2010.

Yang Fudong's works investigate the structure and formation of identity through myth, personal memory and lived experience, and his films and photographs are known for their beautifully timeless and open-ended articulation of multiple perspectives. Focusing on the human condition, a number of his films and photographs portray confused and conflicted individuals from his own generation hovering between the past and present. His work also emphasises the ways that the recent and rapid modernisation of China has overthrown traditional values and culture. Offering the poetics of place and people as an alternative to the prominent politics of power, Yang Fudong's vision is existential, quietly dramatic, and always open to individual interpretation.

His films include Fifth Night (2010), Blue Kylin 2 (2009), The General's Smile (2009), Dawn Mist, Separation Faith (2009), Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest (2007), East of Que Village (2007), No Snow on the Broken Bridge (2006), The Half Hitching Post (2005), The Revival of the Snake (2005), Close to the Sea (2003), An Estranged Paradise (2002), and Flutter, Flutter - Jasmine, Jasmine (2002).

Yang Fudong has exhibited at the 8th Shanghai Biennale (2010), the 17th Biennale of Sydney (2010), the 40th Basel International Art Fair (2009), Switzerland Bern Museum of Art (2009), 52th Venice Biennale (2007), First Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art (2005), 1st International Sharjah Biennale (2005), 1st Prague Biennale (2003) and 5th Shanghai Biennale (2004), and the 5th AsiaPacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (2006). He has had solo exhibitions at the Marian Goodman Gallery (New York, 2009), Parasol Unit (London, 2006), Kunsthalle Wien (2005), Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam, 2005), Castello di Rivoli (Torino, 2005), The Moore Space (Miami, 2003), and ARC/ Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (2003).



Film still from An Estranged Paradise, 2002. © Yang Fudong, ShanghART Gallery, Marian Goodman Gallery

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