

Yang Fudong (born 1971 in Beijing, lives and works in Shanghai) is one of the most important figures of China's contemporary art scene and independent cinema movement. His films and photographic work, often rooted in traditional Chinese painting, examine tensions between urban and rural, history and the present, worldliness and intellectualism. Their a-temporal and dreamlike quality, long and suspended sequences, dividing narratives, as well as multiple relationships and story lines reflect the conundrums of idealism and ideology of a new generation. At the same time, the works address the ideals and anxieties of young people who are struggling to find their place in the fast-paced changes of present-day China. «Estranged Paradise. Works 1993 – 2013», curated by Beatrix Ruf and Philippe Pirotte, is Yang Fudong's first major institutional survey exhibition in Europe, presenting film, installation as well as photography from the late 1990s until today, highlighting the formal aspects of the construction of cinema in the artist's oeuvre and its resonance in Film Noir aesthetics. Following the exhibition in Zurich, the show will travel to the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (21 August – 1 December 2013).

Yang came to the attention of the Western art world in 2002, when he premiered his film *An Estranged Paradise* (1997–2002) at Documenta XI. Beginning with a meditation on the composition of space in Chinese painting, the film traces the spiritual instability of Zhuzi, a young intellectual in the legendary city of Hangzhou. The film reflects the artist's fascination with international cinema, referencing such works as Jim Jarmusch's *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984) and Jean-Luc Godard's *À bout de souffle* (1960), as well as Shanghai films from the 1920s and 1930s, a place and time in which China was strongly influenced by the West. Using camera, lighting and cinematic space to outline the landscape of Chinese modernity, Yang reveals his love of black and white cinematography. Likewise, the contradictions and discontents raised by a progressive modernity as characteristic themes of Film Noir play a significant role in the artist's work: an invocation of the past and anxiety about the future, and tensions between indifference and engagement, remembrance and forgetting. Films that embody Film Noir concepts include the single channel videos *Backyard – Hey, Sun is Rising!* (2001), in which four men engage in a series of simultaneous but isolated rituals: smoking, massage, military exercises in a park; *City Light* (2000), which functions as a noir detective story with elements of slapstick; *Honey* (2003) then again, a stylistic reference to spy films and all their clichés, invokes ambiguity of seduction and deceit as the earmark of espionage, but also a sense of heightened anxiety and alienation, reflecting paranoia, possibly a metaphor for an ambivalent situation in contemporary China. More recently, since Yang doesn't direct his actors anymore, they seem to inhabit plot-less noirs, reflecting the genre more in stylistic ways, as low-key lighting, exaggerated contrasts, a dramatically shadowed lighting, an eroticist style and a psychologically expressive approach to visual composition, or *mise-en-scène*.

The protagonists of Yang's works are mostly his contemporaries, young people between the ages of twenty and forty, who have spent most of their lives in a society in transformation. The ideals and anxieties of a new generation, the dignity of the individual in a rapidly developing society still in the process of adjusting to the material conditions of the constantly changing times, are re-curring themes. This is most obvious in photographic series like *Don't worry, it will be better* (2000) or *Mrs. Huang at M last night* (2006), both depict a fancy lady and her courtiers, in a hotel room or at a night out, seemingly enjoying the trophies of their material success. The sly glances of the protagonists, leave the audience in a state of uncertainty regarding the actual events and the storyline.

In other works some scenes and settings visually recall the literati paintings of ancient China, made by artists and intellectuals pursuing spiritual freedom living in seclusion. *The Evergreen Nature of Romantic Stories* (2000), a series of photographs in which young men and women stare at miniature landscapes (constructed landscapes mimicking natural scenery of rocks, hills and rivers), relocates the importance of reflection in traditional Chinese gardens as a metaphor for personal orientation and identity, in the domesticity of modern apartments. In the early video-installation *Tonight Moon* (2000), men in swimsuits and men in costumes mingle in an Eastern botanical garden. Multiple story lines develop and diverge on small monitors and a large screen, conveying a sense of ambiguity. *International Hotel* (2010), the recent series of black and white photographs of attractive women in bathing suits dipping into a pool at an Art Deco Hotel, invokes the sentimental and touches upon questions about feminine interiority, imbued with melancholy connotations taking the form of moderation and accommodation.

With the film installation *East of Que Village* (2007), Yang diverges from the urbanity of his other work, delivering a highly personal film that focuses on the sense of isolation and loss increasingly present in China's contemporary society as communities are scattered, traditional rural villages dissolved, and the fight for survival takes precedence. The imagery is of a desolate and hostile landscape, the host to a group of wild dogs fighting a merciless life-and-death struggle for survival, with only a sporadic presence of human life and social values.

More and more in recent works, Yang shifts his attention toward a reflection on film production. *The Fifth Night (Rehearsal)* (2010) is an alternative edition of his seven-screen video installation *The Fifth Night* (with each screen running ten minutes and thirty-seven seconds, the exact length of a reel of film), including four full takes as well as an earlier rehearsal. The artist used different lenses for each camera, but films everything at the same moment. Yang calls this type of installation a "spatial film" or "multiple views" film, and he compares the technique to a contemporary form of the Chinese hand scroll. We see the itinerant youths who often occupy his films, with their pensive,

inhibited expressions. Each screen features one solitary “absolute” protagonist; together they compose a series of distinct and mutually unknown worlds. One screen’s lead character, in turn, becomes another’s extra. The sets and props are Yang’s most elaborate to date, with stages, spiral staircases, and alleyways merging into one. The enclosed courtyard in which the piece was shot comes to resemble a maze, pushing the concept of the narrative spatial possibilities of cinema. This bold experiment, which takes an open, outdoor space as an interior, breaks down a boundary that runs throughout Yang’s other films, which have been shot entirely inside or entirely outside. The “rehearsal” version captures the video output from seven monitors that were connected to seven film cameras and ends in “failure”, as one witnesses that one of the cameras breaks, leaving only six channels, assuming the notion that film is both a medium and a site. Additionally, there are three screens of photo documentation and a documentary. Yang coined it a “preview film” because of its raw-image quality, which included viewfinder frames, contradicting the very slick and refined results of the known version. In this instance, Yang transcended his traditional working process of shooting-editing-screening, and pushed further his theory that “anything which has been filmed can be shown. I found that what attracts me the most, and becomes my material, is the process of filmmaking itself.”

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