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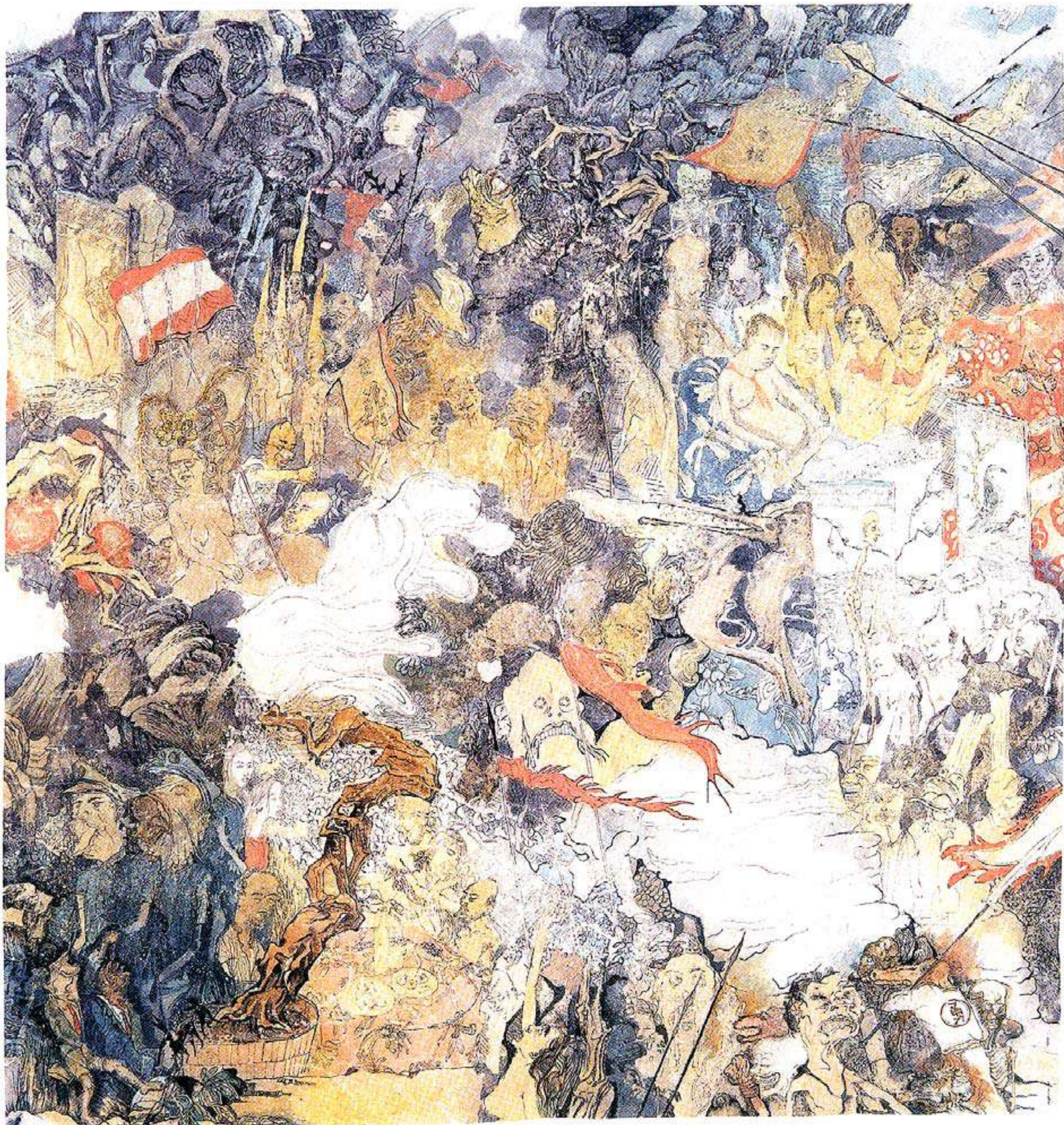
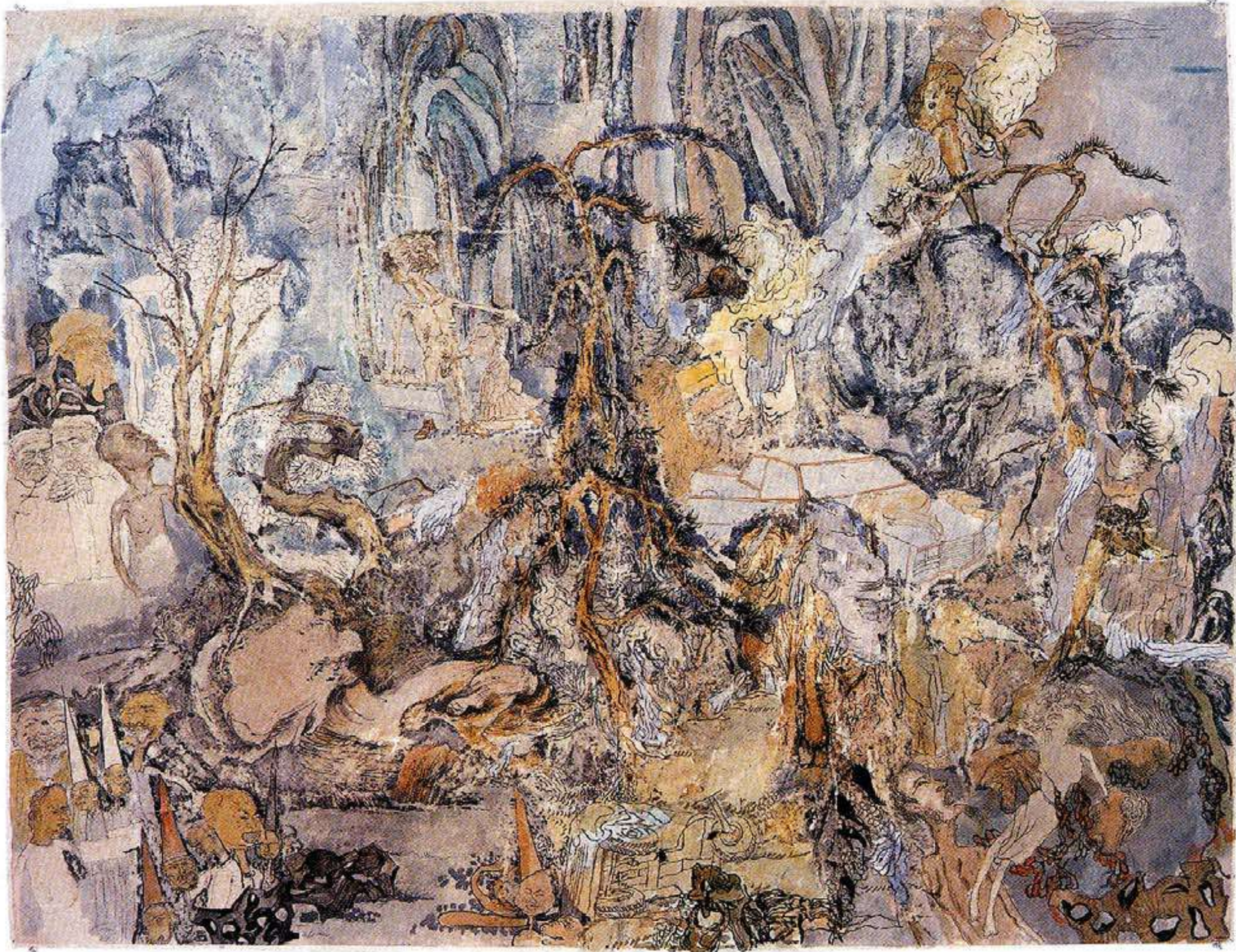
Yun-Fei Ji: Moral Vistas

The New York-based Chinese painter presents densely figured landscapes and interiors as a form of social critique.

BY ROBERT KNAFO



Yun-Fei Ji: The Forbidden City Ghosts, *2002, ink and mineral pigment on mulberry paper, 48⅞ by 45 inches.*



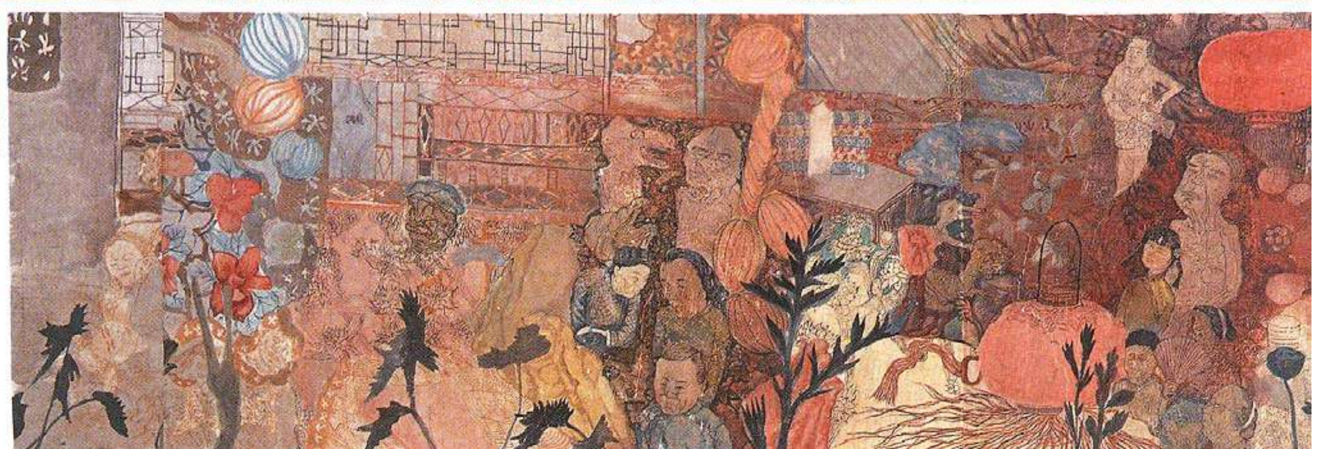
The Picnic, *2001, mineral pigment on mulberry paper, 38 by 49 inches.*

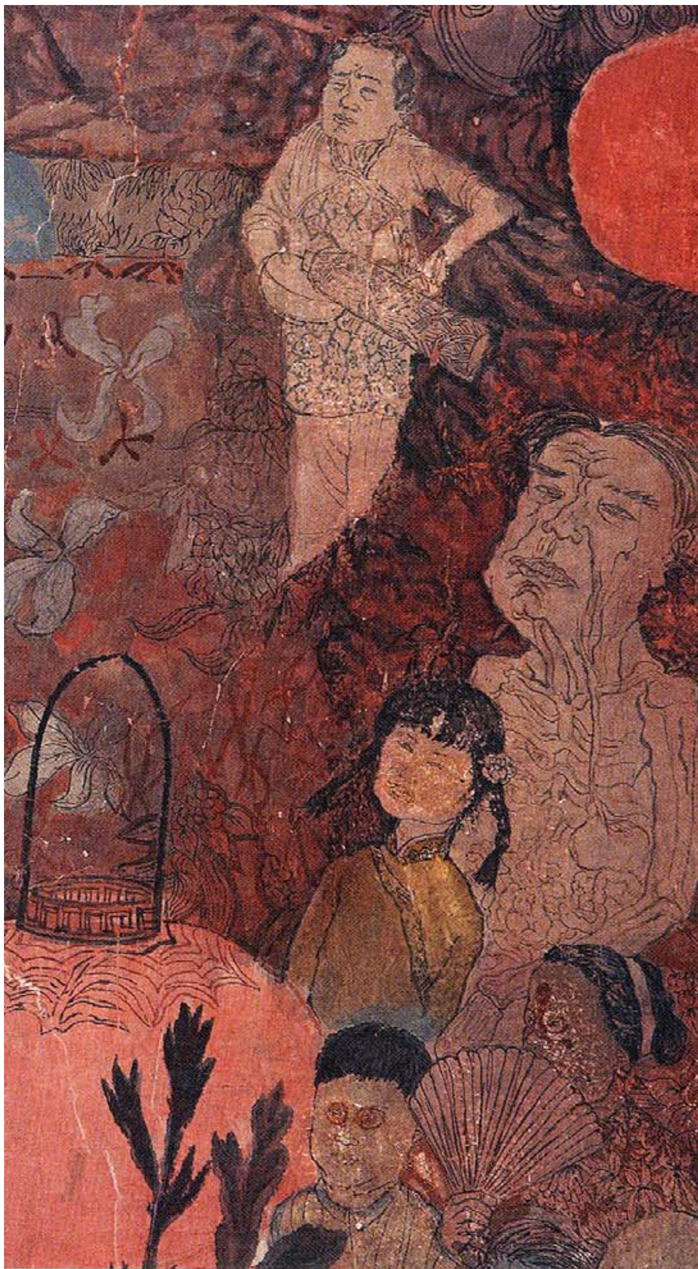
Yun-Fei Ji's artistic project, driven by a deep ethical impulse, is centered on tightly packed ink-and-pigment scenes on paper, populated by often disturbing, sometimes raunchy historical and allegorical figures. Large multiple-view works like *The Picnic* (2001) are hybrid creations—part history painting, part symbolic landscape, part documentary (and, at times, autobiographical) sketchbook. Distinctly Chinese in their visual elements, all affirm the personal and subjective over the public and official; all seamlessly mingle the real and the mythological, the factual and the phantasmagoric. The teeming figures, seemingly one with and animating the earth, carry both traditional and idiosyncratic associations. The result, Ji observes in a recent unpublished essay, is "a meditation on the land as the image of our own moral failure."[1]

Ji was born in Beijing in 1963, the son of a People's Liberation Army doctor and his wife, and grew up in the provincial city of Hangzhou, on a military base where his father ran a clinic. When he was 10, his mother sent him to study with an officer who drew illustrations for PLA combat-training manuals. Later, as a precocious adolescent student at the Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts in the late '70s, Ji saw his teachers have to paint and repaint scenes containing top government officials so as to reflect the most recent reshufflings of political power. Formal strictures at the Academy were equally galling. On the heels of the Cultural Revolution, with art schools only recently reopened, his instructors were still making history and propaganda paintings in the classic rosy-cheeked Socialist Realist style. Among students, knowledge of more experimental Western developments remained stunted, indeed virtually nonexistent—terminating with Rodin and Renoir.

Disdaining this approved esthetic, Ji took a trip, in retrospect a kind of artistic pilgrimage, to the ancient Silk Road area of northwestern China, where he viewed the celebrated Buddhist frescoes (ca. 400-1400 A.D.) in the Mogao cave temples near Dunhuang. He recalls his excitement at confronting these great storytelling cycles, many depicting episodes from the Buddha's life, and being overwhelmed by the narrative force, the immediacy, the sheer inventiveness on display before him. He went on to create a number of works inspired by the experience.

In 1986, Ji left China on a scholarship to the Fulbright College of Art and Science at the University of Arkansas, from which he graduated three years later with an MFA. He has lived in New York since 1990. His exhibition history includes solo shows at Zeno X Gallery in Antwerp and the Pratt Manhattan Gallery, as well as participation in the 2002 Whitney Biennial and group surveys at the Palm Beach Institute of Contemporary Art, the Aldrich Museum in Ridgefield, Conn., and New York's Drawing Center and P.S. 122. A selection of new works goes on view Nov. 14 at Pierogi in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, and a traveling one-person show opens Jan. 16, 2004, at the St. Louis Art Museum.





Left, detail from The Wedding Ballad, *2002, mineral pigments on rice paper, 28½ by 171½ inches. Below, the work in its entirety.*

In the artist's recent paintings, one encounters many historical and cross-cultural references. *The Elegant Gathering* (2002) shows a corrupt gerontocracy ruling over today's China, as members lounge amid a grove of bamboo (long a symbol, in its flexibility, for the Confucian virtues of humility, compliance and compromise) where a white crane (an emblem of aloofness, independence and purity) stands in vivid contrast to the aged, crooked bureaucrats. The political revenge fantasy *Rebellion of the Singing Girls* (2002) shows similarly powerful old men systematically pleasured and dispatched by modern-day versions of the Red Lanterns, former prostitutes who turned themselves into guerrillas during the Boxer Rebellion. The troublesome legacy of the West pervades *Dinner in the Forbidden City* (2001), in which monster-faced British soldiers, reminiscent of 19th-century opium-trade enforcers, tromp through a chaotic landscape. And almost always present, either disguised as gnarled pines or actually playing themselves, are the doggedly enduring common people.

Some of the works become politically rhetorical. *The Forbidden City Ghosts* (2002) offers a return of the repressed on an epic scale, a memory-and-fantasy harvest from the bad old days of the Maoist enterprise. The landscape has Ji's typical tipped-to-the-surface flatness, a device familiar from traditional Asian painting, which allows viewers to survey a rich spread of totalitarian offenses. The scene is anchored in the left middle ground by a nude virago of a Madame Mao, who masturbates with a sizable dildo while presiding over the murder of a political rival at the hands of a masked Lin Biao, once the designated heir to Mao. To the right sits a somnolent, patently oblivious Buddha-like Mao, naked and slavishly attended by scantily clad concubines. It's a latter-day imperial family in deep dysfunction, playing out a "Forbidden City *Macbeth*," as the artist puts it. The dictatorial couple is surrounded by a maelstrom of demons and dunce-capped and/or animal-headed human figures—the ghosts of history. "I grew up with ghost stories—I know the dead are present among the living," the artist says, explaining the frequency of wavering, transparent figures in his oeuvre.

Bustling iconology notwithstanding, Ji's pictures are not exclusively literary or even representational. Indeed, they are marked by strong, spontaneous compositional currents. "In my work," he affirms, "I try to mimic the method that underlies the formation of early Chinese characters: I invent forms that are like words to describe the world." Ji may

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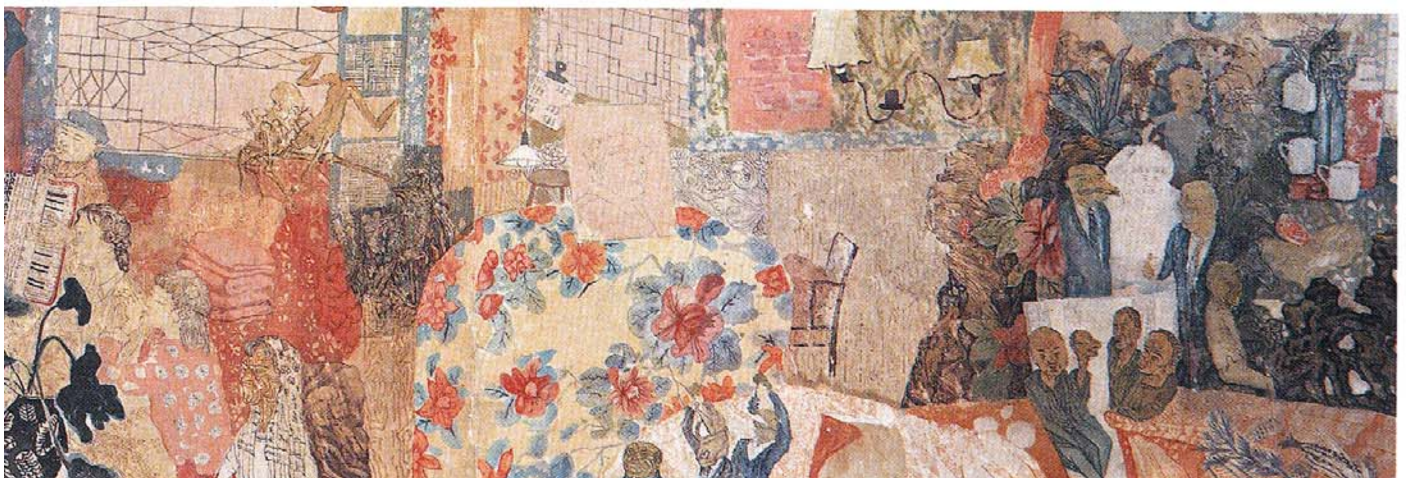

Yun-Fei Ji

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bring a figure to illustrational resolution through specificity of detail, modeling and texture; or let a figure evanesce to some linear pencil-sketchiness, some X-ray-like transparency; or swiftly morph it into caricature or monsterhood. *The Poisonous Grass* (2002), which includes a view of peasants pulling weeds from a rice field, has watery blue splotches scattered across the surface; the pattern weaves together disparate scenes but also emits its own quasi-calligraphic pulse and presence.

Ji's epic tableaus, made the old-fashioned ink-and-brush way, with mineral pigments on rice or mulberry paper, reflect an expert adherence to traditional techniques and pictorial conventions. The exacting figural and naturalist draftsmanship, the earth-toned calligraphic brushwork in matte ink, the ambitious and complex (if somewhat less consistently cohesive) sense of organization, even the wrinkled, fibrous, rustic materiality of the sheets on which Ji paints, all come together to draw the viewer into a fine net of esthetic delectation. But one quickly begins to appreciate to what ends this virtuoso traditionalism is being wielded. Ji seems to be attempting no less than the invention of a subjective, genuinely felt, living pictorial language, one having all the qualities that official art in China lacks.

With "The Old One Hundred Names" (2002), a set of paintings about an imaginary village in the Three Gorges area along the Yangzi River, Ji forgoes the relatively apocalyptic tableaux of the last couple of years for a more intimate documentary encounter with his subjects. A colossal dam, now being completed, will soon flood vast expanses of land in this part of Sichuan Province, thus consigning to oblivion many villages like the one Ji depicts. In response to that impending human-engineered cataclysm, the artist gives us a familiar and tender, even elegiac, look at rural life. His scroll-like panoramas feature multiple perspectives and narrative strands, which together yield an implicit cinematic dimension. Views shift from close-ups to vistas and from one angle of vision to another, as if captured by a peripatetic camera. (During his regular trips back to China, Ji makes many digital photographs of quotidian scenes that he later translates into his painted works.)

In this cycle's *The Wedding Ballad* (2002), Ji adopts a sharply disjunctive format, jump-cutting from intermittent medium-range vignettes of the marriage festivities to up-to-the-surface patches of floral-patterned cloth. He often displays a particular interest in machines, fabrics, musical instruments and other domestic items that evoke ordinary living conditions during the midcentury turmoil of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Rustic ceremonies and rituals, the well-worn routines of daily life, bicycles and tractors, popular prints that depict anthropomorphic animals from didactic folk tales and myths are all, for Ji, touchstones of cultural authenticity.

Clearly, then, progressive (not to say redemptive) motives pervade Ji's work. With his shotgun marriage of the traditional and the experimental, his sweeping embrace of both political intrigue and everyday life, the artist creates a vivid picture of recent Chinese history. Insisting on an individual perspective, he repeatedly seeks—through the agency of a critical, witnessing imagination—to reclaim this complex experience from silence, invisibility and officialdom. □

1. All biographical reminiscences and quotes are from Ji's conversations with the author in late fall 2002.

"Yun-Fei Ji: The Old One Hundred Names" appeared at the Pratt Manhattan Gallery [Mar. 7-Apr. 12]. A show of new work, "One Hundred Flowers," goes on view at Pierogi Gallery in Brooklyn [Nov. 14-Dec. 15], and a solo exhibition opens this winter at the St. Louis Art Museum [Jan. 16-Mar. 21, 2004], with subsequent venues to be announced.

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