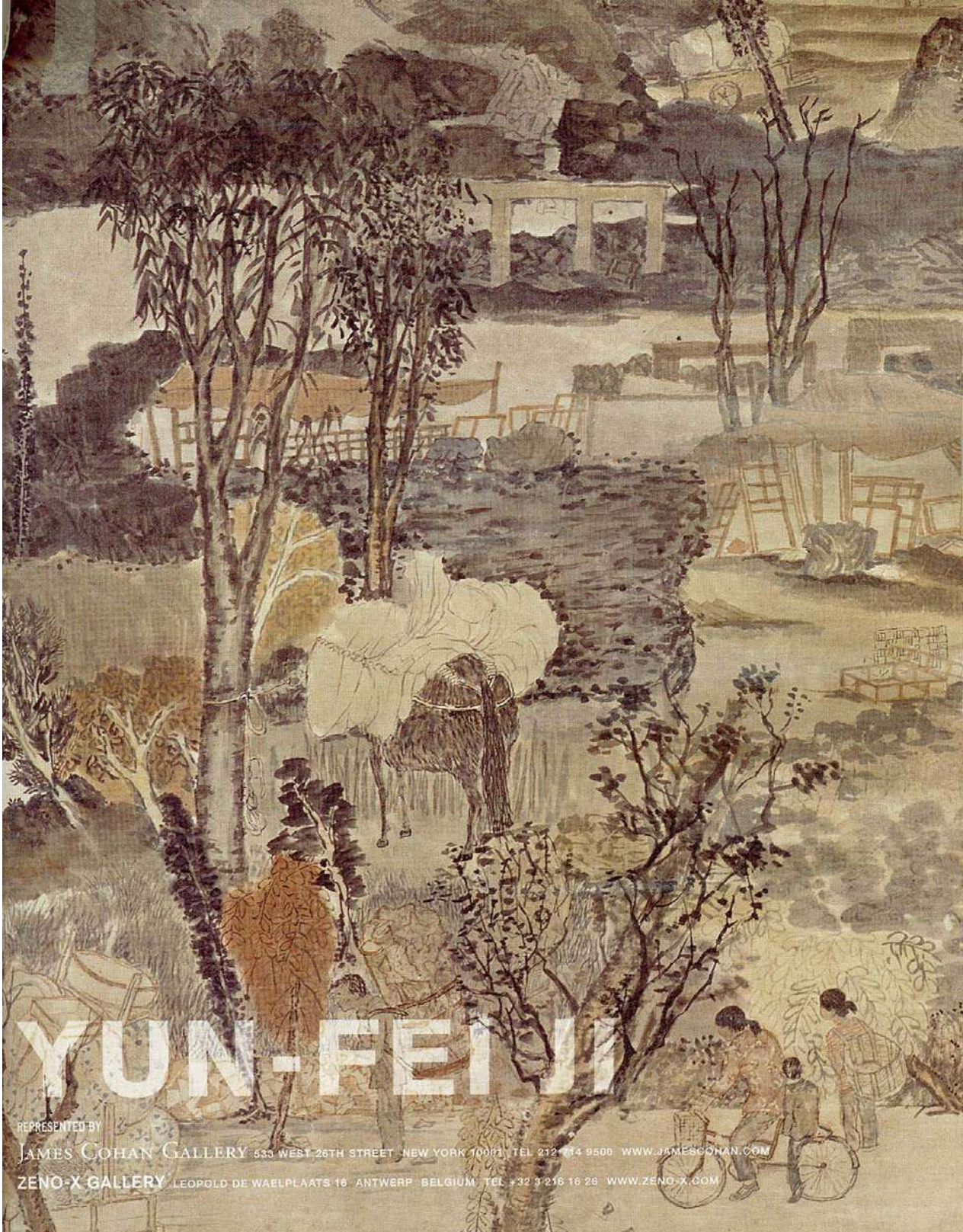


Prose, Francine, 'Watercolored – Demons and Detritus in Yun-Fei Ji's restive landscapes; Yun-Fei Ji', Modern Painters, March, (2007) p.3 / 17 / 78-83



CONTENTS

78

YUN-FEI JI
THE DEAD CAN STILL DANCE,
2006
MINERAL PIGMENTS AND INK
ON MULBERRY PAPER,
36 1/2 X 58 IN.
COURTESY JAMES COHAGALLERY,
NEW YORK



54

VICTOR LIMPREV
STILL FROM **SUMMER
LIGHTNINGS,** 2004
VIDEO, 2 MIN 40 SEC
COURTESY RESINA-GALLERY,
MOSCOW



64

RODNEY GRAHAM'S STUDIO IN
VANCOUVER, JANUARY 2007
PHOTO: SCOTT LIVINGSTONE

Features

64 Rodney Graham
In the Studio with the
Gifted Amateur
by Shepherd Steiner

70 Feminist Art
VIVA
by Carrie Moyer

78 Yun-Fei Ji
Water Colored
by Francine Prose

84 Francis Alÿs
The Distance Between
by Martin Herbert

Report

92 Reviews
New York, San Francisco,
Minneapolis, Miami,
London, Salisbury,
Munich, Darmstadt,
Frankfurt, Seville, Paris

104 Books
Mitch Epstein, *Virtue and
Terror*, Amiri Baraka,
J'accuse, *Between Artists:*
*Silvia Kolbowski/Walid
Raad*

70

SARAH LUCAS
THE SPERM THING (DETAIL), 2005
STEEL BUCKLE, CAST CONCRETE
FOOTBALL, AND NYLON TIGHTS,
10 X 76 X 21 IN.
COURTESY SADIE COLES LTD, LONDON



110 Index

112 Working Practice
Eungie Joo
by Catherine Tall

WATER COLORED

DEMONS AND DETRITUS IN YUN-FEI JI'S RESTIVE LANDSCAPES

By **FRANCINE PROSE**
Portraits by **TARA DARBY**

Last spring, at the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga in Lisbon, an hour dropped out of my life as I stood in front of Hieronymus Bosch's *Temptation of Saint Anthony* (ca. 1500). Initially drawn in by the teeming hallucinatory drama, I then began to focus on the details: the beaky black bird whose suit of armor is constructed from a funnel and other, less-familiar kitchen implements; the red-robed church dignitary with the head of a fantastically horned stag; the giant strawberry—or is it a cave?—sheltering an assortment of chalky humanoids. Something similar—accompanied by that same sense of slippage, an exit from and sudden reentry into ordinary time—happened to me at the Capodimonte in Naples, in the gallery where Caravaggio's *Flagellation of Christ* (ca. 1607) hangs, and where I spent 40 minutes until, no longer able to stand the grief streaming from the painting, I finally moved on.



**THE LOUSPEAKER'S
SONG, 2006**
MINERAL PIGMENTS AND
INK ON MUL BERRY PAPER,
43 1/2 X 26 IN.
COURTESY JAMES COHAN GALLERY,
NEW YORK



Each of Yun-Fei Ji's paintings elicits and rewards a significant commitment of time. They give you, to put it crudely, a lot to look at. At first it takes a while to recover from the shock of realizing that what they seem to be—large vertical or horizontal works, painted on mulberry paper with calligraphic brushstrokes of ink and mineral pigment, evoking classical Chinese landscape scrolls—is not in fact (or not entirely) what they are. As you get closer, as with the Bosch, little

Menacing demonic spirits rise, misshapen and grizzled, one with a monstrous tongue, none of whom seems to be enjoying a happy or peaceful afterlife.

details, people, objects, minidramas begin to pop out of the paintings and clamor for your attention. What is that truck emblazoned with the image of Chairman Mao and the corrugated garage door doing in the misty Song dynasty mountains, and why is that barge of shipping containers floating down the ancient Yangtze River? Why are those roosters and strange birds dressed in Red Army caps and uniforms looking up at a solar disco ball made of Communist-era loudspeakers? Why all those houses in ruins and those displaced people on the road, with their animals and belongings? And who are those ghostly figures, the sketchy, nearly transparent, remarkably lively dead returned to look, with dismay, at the places where they used to live?

Most of Yun-Fei's recent paintings refer to the Three Gorges Dam, a controversial hydroelectric project first planned by the Chinese government in the early 1980s,

which, by its completion, estimated for 2009, will have flooded more than 300 square miles; displaced up to two million people; wiped out over a thousand villages, several cities, and countless important archaeological sites; permanently disfigured a magnificent and historically resonant landscape; and raised the specter of serious environmental damage as it inundates toxic dump sites and dislodges the detritus that plays such a central role in these paintings. Yun-Fei has visited this area many

times and uses details (such as a house without a roof or a basketball net) that catch his eye from the hundreds of photographs he has taken of the region. The ruins that have been, and will continue to be, created provide the setting for his compositions, while the action consists of the mass migration that threads through these mountains and forests. Although his depiction of the landscape, or what is left of it, is relatively true to life, many of Yun-Fei's figures spring from his imagination. The ghosts, for example, are the spirits of the dead whose remains lie beneath this land, and who continue to walk the earth that is about to be flooded.

In one painting, *Last Days Before the Flood* (all works 2006), nearly all the humans are gone. Doors and window frames remain, concrete steps lead to an empty doorway that opens to an overgrown courtyard. What has been left behind—a kitchen table, a potted plant—is the only clue to the life that was lived here for centuries. If you look closely, the last people, a family of scavengers, swim into focus in the lower left-hand corner of the painting, as a pig, hidden amid the luggage and discarded furniture, waits to be carted off.

The largest painting in Yun-Fei's recent show at James Cohan Gallery in New York, *Below the 143 Meter Watermark*, is almost 10 feet tall. It, too, appears from a distance to resemble a monumental classical scroll that draws on the tradition and symbolism of Confucian idiom. The highest mountain represents the



FACING PAGE
YUN-FEI JI IN HIS STUDIO,
PARASOL UNIT, LONDON,
JANUARY 2007

ABOVE
YUN-FEI JI'S STUDIO,
PARASOL UNIT, LONDON,
JANUARY 2007



**LAST DAYS BEFORE THE
FLOOD, 2006**
MINERAL PIGMENTS AND INK
ON MULBERRY PAPER,
75 1/2 X 70 IN.
COURTESY OF JAMES MICHENER, JR.,
NEW YORK



NINE WOMEN, 2006
MINERAL PIGMENTS AND INK
ON MULBERRY PAPER,
24 1/2 X 34 1/2 IN.
COURTESY JAMES COHAIN GALLERY,
NEW YORK

emperor, the groves of bamboo, the artists and scholars—incorruptible, flexible, bending but not breaking as the wind (the power of the emperor) blows through them. But once more, this order and stability is everywhere disrupted by the skewed ruined houses, the corrugated walls and garage doors, the abandoned chairs in which no one will sit again.

But the *Three Gorges* project is itself only a detail of Yun-Fei's larger objective, which is to create a work of art that borrows from older forms to make something completely new. His work makes you feel as if someone has actually animated a classical Chinese painting, the way in Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1971 film *The Decameron* the figures in a Giotto fresco depicting the journey to Bethlehem begin to move. The vivacity of his vision is almost enough to make you believe in ghosts and reincarnation, in the spirit of a Song dynasty landscape painter reborn inside a kid with a fondness for comic books who grew up in Cultural Revolution China and studied with an illustrator of combat manuals.

An immensely pleasant, humorous man with a lively, sharp intelligence, an unfailingly fresh response to the world around him, and an air of being surprised (either delighted or appalled) by what he sees and hears, Yun-Fei talks with me about how those impressions become part of his work. What's most striking is his belief in the power and acuity of observation, of "keeping my eyes open and putting my energy into looking and recording, putting all my faith into looking and describing." He is interested in things that reveal themselves only slowly, in the details that persuade us, that make the narrative element of his paintings not only plausible but also dramatic and emotionally charged. He knows a lot about who his characters are as he tracks them through a painting, such as *Nine Women*. This work is intimate in scale, and the women in it—at least one of whom appears elsewhere in his recent paintings—are perhaps relatives, close acquaintances, or local matriarchs. Rising behind them are menacing giant roosters and demonic spirits, strangled, misshapen, grizzled, one with a monstrous tongue, none of whom seems to be enjoying a happy or peaceful afterlife. "I was imagining village life," Yun-Fei explains, "and I started thinking about the ghost stories I heard so much when I was a kid staying with my grandmother in the Chinese countryside. I thought of those long summer nights. We had no TV; people would sit around, trying to get cool, telling ghost stories." He adds, laughing, "I used to get really afraid."

Born in Beijing in 1963, Yun-Fei Ji is the son of an army doctor. During the Cultural Revolution and not long after the artist's second birthday, his mother was sent to a labor camp for several years of "reeducation," and Yun-Fei was raised by his grandmother in the southern city of Hangzhou. The image of the sunflower turning away from the blaring sun of audio-indoctrination in *Loudspeaker Sounds* is his wry comment on the often-heard exhortation that children should be like sunflowers turning phototropically toward the glorious light of Chairman Mao. Typically, the painting combines references to distant and disparate eras and cultures. The sounds of the Cultural Revolution are being

broadcast to an avian audience, whose members reflect the different ranks that bird species were assigned in the hierarchical Confucian pecking order.

After an early apprenticeship with the combat-manual illustrator, Yun-Fei attended Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts at a time when socialist realism was still the only acceptable style in contemporary Chinese art, and when classical painting was despised for its association with the "four olds": old custom, old culture, old habits, and old ideas. In 1986 he arrived in the US on a scholarship to study at the University of Arkansas. Based in Brooklyn over the subsequent two decades, he has recently spent a year at the American Academy in Rome and is currently on a yearlong fellowship at London's Parasol Unit. He says he loved Rome, citing the way the city seems miraculously to organize history and art history in a clearly visible, at once thrilling and beautiful time line.

Yun-Fei tells me that learning to keep things simple is a perennial struggle ("I always wanted to do too much") and refers, with remarkable lightness and without a trace of portentousness or self-seriousness, to what I suppose is Taoist art theory: the awareness of balancing wet and dry, yang and the yin, the tranquillity of Song

Yun-Fei balances the tranquillity of Song landscape and the jittery animation of a vintage comic, the watery blotches that classical painters willed into mountains and the hard, communicative line of Cultural Revolution combat manuals.

landscape and the jittery animation of a vintage comic, the watery blotches that classical painters willed into mountains and the hard, communicative line (dictated by urgency and practical necessity) of Cultural Revolution combat manuals. He marvels at the way that marks appear on the page and begin to form figures, a background, and then a story.

The density and complexity Yun-Fei achieves seem not only spatial but temporal. It's as if centuries have been distilled and compressed into a painting large enough to span the Song dynasty and the Cultural Revolution, the *Tao Te Ching*, and *The Little Red Book*, the songs and poems and sayings that Chairman Mao attempted to replace with rhetoric, as well as the animate and the inanimate, the living and the dead, angry ghosts and rooster-headed spirits. Like a Bosch painting, or a classical Chinese scroll, Yun-Fei's works make it clear that you are looking at a world with elements of ours, but a world that never existed, and never will. But still you keep believing that if you look hard enough and long enough, you might get a sense of how it feels to leave your life for an hour or so, and inhabit the world of the painting.

Turn to Index, on page 110, for detailed information about Yun-Fei's work.