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## Grasping the Ungraspable

Yun-Fei Ji's classical forms document China's controversial modernization

BY MEL WATKIN

The gates of central China's Three Gorges Dam closed on June 1, 2003, completing a major phase in one of the largest construction projects ever undertaken. As it gradually transforms three hundred and fifty miles of the Yangtze River into a narrow lake between now and 2009, it will inundate numerous cities, displace an estimated 1.4 million people and cost a projected twenty-five billion dollars. Proponents of this complex, highly disputed enterprise cheer employment opportunities, economic development, an end to seasonal flooding and the institution of basic services such as reliable electricity, good highways and clean sources of water. Opponents mourn the displacement of people, the reduction of arable land and the loss of scenic beauty, as well as the relocation or loss of sacred temples, artworks and archeological sites. Displaced residents along the Yangtze already maintain that promised jobs, free land and relocation money have not been forthcoming and that serious environmental problems are being glossed over.

How can an artist address such a momentous undertaking? Chinese born New York artist Yun-Fei Ji wisely approaches this situation indirectly. His recent work creates intriguing memorials by combining classical Chinese painting methods and imagery with depictions of real people and scenes from his recent travels to the ancient city of Badong on the Yangtze River. (Both Badong and the nearby Three Gorges, often the subjects of classical painting and poetry, will be flooded by the dam project.) By embedding people from Badong in scenes of classical beauty, Ji acknowledges the historic value of the area and gives his work a timeless quality. Rather than a documentary approach, Ji creates compelling images through which we can begin to grasp the ungraspable. His paintings freeze lost moments in a forced migration that is almost too devastating to describe.

Over the past five years, as the dam has gone from idea to reality, the impact of the project has forced itself into Ji's consciousness more and more often. His concerns first emerged visually in a work on paper entitled *The Three Gorges Project* (2000). This piece compelled him to travel to the area on his next visit home to China—a journey that, in turn, prompted him to begin a series called "The Old One Hundred Names" when he returned to New York.

*The Three Gorges Project* and "The Old One Hundred Names" series both employ Ji's longstanding technique of using the mulberry paper, mineral pigments and dense, stacked perspective of the Chinese classical tradition. Narrative also is



Yun-Fei Ji, *The Monk's Retreat*, from the series "The Old One Hundred Names," 2002, ink and mineral pigment on mulberry paper, 37 by 139 inches (courtesy Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp).

central to Ji's work, and he has often focused his astute gaze on modern Chinese history by placing well-known figures such as Madam Mao and Richard Nixon beside monstrous beings, ghosts or mythical creatures. These threatening, unearthly entities contribute to Ji's dense moral symbolism, which derives from the classical Chinese artistic convention of assigning iconographic meaning to every flower, plant and tree—much like seventeenth century Vanitas painting. By juxtaposing these political figures and mythical beasts with common people going about their everyday routines, Ji suggests that the daily struggle for survival continues despite bureaucratic high jinks.

"The Old One Hundred Names" series focuses on common people, to acknowledge those whose land, livelihood, family life and culture are being destroyed. For example, the left panel of the diptych *Monk's Retreat* (2002) shows a torrent of water assaulting the verdant fissures of a gorge. A house and water tower succumb to the water's pressure as drowned pigs and other beasts tumble by. The right panel depicts more contemporary images, including an overturned car and a thermos bottle cart (a ubiquitous image in China where all drinking water must be boiled). A group of ghost men, created using negative space, have been left behind to drown.





*The Move of Badong* (2001), one of the first works Ji created after his travels, similarly foregrounds common people—in this case, their relocation—with the exception of two bureaucrats with fish heads. Ji's change of emphasis, from satire and fantasy to the everyday, grew out of his understanding that progress in China has come at great cost to the common people, the Wongs and Lis of his land (i.e.: China's version of the Smiths and Joneses and the impetus behind the series title "The Old One Hundred Names").

In the lower left corner of *The Move of Badong*, a day worker with a huge bundle of wood surveys his half-deserted city, seeing misty clouds and a beautiful stacked landscape, but also seeing a tractor overflowing with the possessions of people being relocated. He sees partially demolished homes and flattened ancient ruins, but also a city where daily life continues in a surreal, yet necessary, manner.

*The Flood of Badong* (2003), Ji's most recent painting and latest addition to the "One Hundred Names" project, is similar in composition and tonality to *The Move of Badong* and, as in the earlier *Monk's Retreat*, uses water as a powerful narrative force. Rather than illustrating the slow flooding that will take place, Ji depicts Badong's devastation emotionally by unleashing a cascade of water onto the town and its inhabitants, leaving piles of bodies and tearing at trees and rocks that brace themselves against the onslaught. In the center left of the piece

a group of people stand, frozen in fear, seconds before the full force of the water hits them.

If Ji suggests in "The Old One Hundred Names" that modernization is needed, he also shows that it has come at a terrible cost and that, for a few short-term gains, his country has sustained permanent, avoidable losses. <sup>AP</sup>

Yun-Fei Ji's solo exhibition "One Hundred Flowers" will be at Williamsburg's Pierogi from November 14 to December 15, 2003 before traveling to the Saint Louis Museum of Contemporary Art in January 2004.

To see other images by Yun-Fei Ji, read this article online at [www.artpapers.org](http://www.artpapers.org)

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