

Pennington Clare, 'Water Work Yun-Fei Ji'. Time Out Beijing (CN), nr.93, July 2012, p.53.

Water Work Yun-Fei Ji



Inside the gallery, 'Water Rising' (2006) takes the shape of a long scroll winding around the corners of the narrow white exhibition hall. Viewers must move in order to follow its tale, as it depicts chairs piled up amid bundles of belongings, and nearby waters creeping up diminishing mountains. The trees seem half-razed, shorn of their former majesty. The works in this exhibition might stand as witnesses to their time, but they are also filled with inventiveness, poetic gusto and artistic creativity.

'The Last Days of Village Wen' (2011) begins with a chapter written in clear, clerical calligraphy. It tells of the flooding of Wen: 'There was no rain for eight months,' the scroll begins, before describing the need for villagers to become itinerant workers. Then, in a way not only creative, but deeply emotive, it narrates a sudden flood that kills enough fish to feed Wen for years.

Other pieces are interwoven with legendary creatures and animalistic humans. In 'Boxers' (2003), the myths and realities of the Boxer Rebellion are treated with analytical and artistic fervour; some Chinese figures are depicted as half-pig, while a few of the foreign colonialists, singled out by their rounded beige helmets, viciously gobble down whole women. Tragedy and political satire sit side by side.

Elsewhere, in 'The Last Days Before the Flood' (2006), officials armed with whips float god-like behind streams of people, moving them on like herds of cattle. Ji makes his points with efficiency. This exhibition is both a visual feast and a sharp and timely commentary set in the wider context of global history. Clare Pennington



UCCA Until Sunday 15

After Hurricane Katrina rocked New Orleans in 2005, the world was shaken by the realisation that even the mighty US government was unable to help some of those worst affected by the floods. Then, in China, cracks in the Three Gorges Dam in 2011 meant the sudden resettlement of 300,000 people – adding to the million already relocated by the mega-project.

Both are moments that defined our modern age with their images of devastation and suffering. In *Water Work*, the artist Yun-Fei Ji sets out to re-record the effects of these and other examples of mass human displacement through an unexpected medium. He does so through Chinese traditional ink and watercolour painting, lithography and printing; an ancient form of social commentary for which literary and artistic giants such as Du Fu (712-780 AD) are still revered. What's more, he does it well.