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An Artist Conjures the Ghosts of Displacement

Yun-fei Ji composes a seamless synthesis of Western and Eastern art in the service of his subject: the government-sanctioned erasure of entire villages in the name of progress.

John Yau

Yun-fei Ji, "Tumbling" (2017-2018), watercolor and ink on Xuan paper, 39 1/2 x 34 1/2 inches (all images courtesy James Cohan Gallery)

Yun-fei Ji, who was born in Beijing, China, in 1963, made an important body of work in Rome while on a Prix de Rome fellowship in 2006. He has made work in London; New York City; Beijing; and near Gambier, Ohio – where he currently has a studio. He is a Chinese artist who isn't just a Chinese artist, an American artist who isn't just an American artist. When a curator at an American museum told him he couldn't show his work because he is Chinese, he replied: "I am as American as Willem de Kooning."

I think the idea of identity is important to bring up, especially when there is a lot of heated discussion about it, from the Oval Office in the White House to the benches in a dog park. It is a subject that Ji and I inevitably return to whenever we talk, which we first did in the winter of 2006, for an interview in *The Brooklyn Rail*. In the age of globalization and migration, both voluntary and forced, Ji is an artist who doesn't quite fit comfortably into China or America for more reasons than I can enumerate, and so I will focus on just one: his art. He can live in either place, and he has, but that does not necessarily mean he feels safe in either one.

The connection between Ji and classical Chinese art has been an obvious point of reference that many writers have noted. Less obvious is Ji's transformation of different strands of representation and calligraphic mark-making into something that is neither a nostalgic revival nor an unwieldy melding. Rather, what Ji has done is compose a space that is a seamless synthesis of Western and Eastern art in the service of his subject, which is the government-sanctioned displacement of a vast number of Chinese, as villages are erased from existence in the name of progress. He has braided together the caricatural drawing style of George Grosz and the naturalist depictions of weird ghosts by Luo Ping, an unlikely pairing he has made into something all his own.

In his exhibition, *Yun-Fei Ji: Rumors, Ridicules and Retributions* at James Cohan (April 28–June 17, 2018), the artist brings a vast and deeply researched knowledge to bear on his longtime preoccupation with the direct effects of China's drive to supply sprawling megalopolises such as Beijing with an adequate supply of water. One way that China has done this is to force entire village populations to relocate. This means that neighbors are often separated and moved to different areas where they know no one.

Yun-fei Ji, "Eight Neighbors" (2017-2018), watercolor and ink on Xuan paper, 42 1/2 x 30 1/2 inches

Yun-fei Ji, "The Underworld Petitioners" (2017-2018), watercolor and ink on Xuan paper, 40 1/4 x 28 1/4 inches

At the same time, new cities are quickly being built, mostly to provide housing for workers in vast factories, such as those seen in the film *Manufactured Landscapes* (2007), directed by Jennifer Baichwal and starring Edward Burtynsky. If you take a bullet train across China, you will see clusters of high rises in the distance, which raise the question: who are the people living in this isolated enclaves and how did they get there? What is the purpose of this city?

Ji works uses watercolor and ink to paint on paper. Should anybody ask, I would call him a painter. His subjects are the villagers displaced by Postmodern China's global ambition. Like many villagers throughout the world, they are superstitious, believing in ghosts and gossip, and distrustful of outsiders, which include the people living in a neighboring village. They are the country mice of Aesop's fable and its many variants and retellings.

In the tall, vertical work, "Break Camp" (2017-18), two identical red trucks are partially visible near the top of the stacked composition. Beneath them, the villagers' worldly goods — tables, chairs, pots, pans, barrels, baskets full of things wrapped in blankets, sheets, and quilts — are piled up. The slightly elevated view of this bric-a-brac-filled landscape is claustrophobic, since the horizon is not clearly defined. The people seem cut off from the rest of the world. This sense is underscored by the absence of modern conveniences: no televisions or radios are waiting to be put on the trucks. No one is on his or her cellphone.

Yun-fei Ji, "Break Camp" (2017-2018), watercolor and ink on Xuan paper, 69 x 37 1/2 inches

Without emphasizing it, Ji shows the viewer a group of powerless, isolated people regarded by the government as obstacles to progress. The trucks are signs of the government's power, but we do not see the truck drivers or anyone enforcing the move. The attention paid to the villagers' meager possessions conveys the artist's sympathy and anger. As someone who grew up during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and whose family suffered from it, as everyone in China did, Ji knows that the tumult has not ceased but entered another phase. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong's perverse genius turned everyone into a spy or a victim, even within families; Jean-Paul Sartre's "Hell is other people" does not begin to describe that period of Chinese history when freedom of every sort was denied.

Who are the skeletons standing among the villagers? They are reminders that the past accompanies us wherever we go, but they are also more than that. The artist's depiction of ghosts, otherworldly creatures, and skeletons introduce us to a world where these beings are real, not just a figment of the imagination. There is no separation between the rational and irrational in his world, in which internally displaced refugees, carrying their worldly possessions, walk through partially flooded terrain with no destination in sight. If, as the Japanese hermit poet Basho said, "the journey itself is the home," then the people we see moving through this landscape are as at home as they will ever be.

That is why, in certain works, Ji's use of a scroll format seems particularly right for his subjects: it is not because it is Chinese but because it evokes a journey that is endless and without sanctuary. Presented in a vitrine in the front gallery, "The Village Wen's Progress" (2017), is 19 ½ inches high and 132 ½ inches in length, while in the back room he placed "The Village and its Ghosts" (2014), which is 15 ¾ inches high by 684 ¼ inches wide. By making a monumental work that is impossible to see all at once, Ji reminds us that we can never know the entire truth of what these displaced people endured.

Yun-fei Ji, "They Come Out Together" (2017-2018), watercolor and ink on Xuan paper, 40 1/2 x 30 1/2 inches

In "They Come Out Together" (2017-2018), nearly all the men and women are sticking out their tongues, a childish act of defiance. Others are wearing masks. It could be a Halloween party full of slightly inebriated revelers, but it is not: it is a group of powerless people angry about what is happening to them, which Ji never discloses. Rather than singling out the cause of their anger, as if it is only one thing, the artist is sympathetic to whatever acts of group insolence the villagers can muster. He knows that only in such childish behavior and concerted efforts can the individual feel relatively safe, even if that sense of security is at best an illusion. In "The Underworld Petitioners" (2017-2018), three poorly dressed individuals are seated on the ground, imploring an unseen authority. By keeping the authorities offstage, Ji depicts a Kafka-esque world that has become irrevocable fact. The oversized, grimacing, distorted faces test our capacity for sympathy, which I think is part of the meaning that the artist is getting at. How do we feel about what happens to others who live largely invisible lives?

In "Tumbling" (2017-18), Ji depicts an upside-down horse and three men in their underwear sleeping on a straw mat as they plummet past tree branches, where wrapped bundles are snagged. A grinning skull is also visible. Are the men dreaming? If so, does it mean for them to live in a world where three men must share one straw mat at night? Is it a collective nightmare? Ji is a narrative artist who invites the viewer to complete the story he has depicted in muted colors. His mastery of painting in watercolors and inks is inimitable. It seems to me that the future of painting does not lie in parody, citation, or commentary. By using the kind of humble means – brush, paper, and colored water — that the villagers, who live without access to modern conveniences, would be familiar with, however educated or uneducated they might be, Ji aligns himself with his subjects. By being attentive to his subjects's ghost stories, insults, and reliance on rumors, Ji recognizes their irrepressible disobedience. For him, it is a small sign of hope.

Yun-Fei Ji: Rumors, Ridicules and Retributions *continues at James Cohan Gallery (291 Grand Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through June 17.*