



Fantastic Cosmographies

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Traditional Chinese landscape painting, through its depiction of mountain rock, flowing water and swirling air, renders the cosmological interplay of form and void. Sometimes a tiny presence intervenes, a house or a figure on a path that draws the eye, folding human activity into the larger dynamic. The outward marks of brush and ink reveal inward energies and harmonies. Sometimes the scene represents an actual place and time, more often it is part imaginary, contoured by pressures and coloured by speculations from within. Among the most famous of all Chinese paintings is the *Qing Ming Shang He Tu*, a horizontal scroll from the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127) attributed to Zhang Zeduan. Known in English as 'Life Along the River at the Pure Brightness Festival', the painting vividly depicts daily riverside life in China's then capital during the mid-spring festival when people customarily remember their ancestors. It is known for its thronging human, architectural and topographical detail. Nature and humanity, the myriad forms of life and their memorialising in art, combine here in a prolific, panoramic image. The word *tu* in the title is the classical Chinese term for 'picture'. Yet it also means 'plan' or 'map' (as in modern Chinese *ditu*). A painting such as *Qing Ming Shang He Tu* can be read as a kind of cosmography, a visual representation of boundless nature, human existence and the universal in spatial relationship.

Guan Wei appropriates that ancestral masterpiece, now familiar in reproduction, as a starting point for his own work, *Looking for Enemies* (2004). He overlays the stylised surface of the traditional painting with graphics from a different code, the contemporary computer game, its icons drawn in turn from military software: invasive black cut-outs that contrast starkly with the background of refined life a thousand years ago. The idea is that if you look for enemies you will find them, bringing them into existence from your own projected fear and aggression. This can be taken as a reference to the war of terror, and perhaps more specifically to the mission of Western forces to smoke out the enemy from their traditional remote landscapes. Guan Wei plays satirically with the notion of mental mapping, by which human desire—like a pumped-up boy's adventure, armed with technology and the assertion of supremacy—reshapes the environment in a toxic way. It applies to the West, but might also apply to the East, the fake Song scene of refined cultural difference merely a thin veil over a dangerous will to power.

In the history of cartography the mapping of the real has gone hand in hand with the imagining of the unreal. The cataloguing of the known has required projection into the unknown as boundaries are reached. West to East and vice versa, North to South. Australia is a spectacular example of this, an absence on a map that prompted fanciful and forceful attempts to fill in what was missing. Yet what was missing was there all along, only not to European eyes and not to Chinese eyes either, although Ming admiral Zheng He may have passed by six hundred years ago on his remarkable voyage. That is the subject of work by Guan Wei for a forthcoming exhibition at Sydney's Powerhouse Museum. Aboriginal and other indigenous stories, traced in song and pigment, produced different sorts of maps—another place where picture was cosmography—of which outsiders had no idea. Developments in navigation, trade and colonisation had to reach a certain point before the territorial outline of the Australian continent could be drawn. The task was mostly completed with Matthew Flinders' celebrated circumnavigation in 1803. For this new domain to be added to the world's cartographical inventory, co-ordinates in time and space,

history and geography, and the actions of key individuals, small in the grand scheme of things, heroic nonetheless—had to intersect in a marvellous way. That is what Guan Wei stages with wit and style in *Unfamiliar Land* (2006). This work in many panels takes the form of an anachronistic map—naïve, illustrative, indicative, fantastical. It tells a tale of technology and empire, curiosity and aggression, expansion and encounter. It also suggests a greater cosmology where human actions are contained within larger, more elemental processes of creation and destruction. Through the use of silhouette, a favoured form of image-making in the age of empire, the artist renders fauna, flora and people as alike exotic and strange, as a child in another age might entertain them. The alarmed and belligerent encounters of boundary crossing between Europeans and indigenous peoples are seen with cheeky cartoon clarity. Desperate figures clinging to their sinking boats as sea monsters close in make the closer connection with the plight of recent refugees. The ancient drama of open waters, porous borders and disputed lands is also contemporary: Australia's border protection policy has the fangs of the fantastical shark that used to be put on maps to scare mariners.

Unfamiliar Land is accompanied by a wall painting on a similar theme, with boats and people, clouds, islands, fish and birds, produced expressly for the site by the artist and his assistant in the days preceding the exhibition and intended to be painted over at its conclusion. While it may allude to the great Chinese Buddhist heritage of mural painting, the wall painting subverts the aspiration to permanence in the manner of graffiti. It also contrasts with the collectability of the companion work on multiple, conveniently sized portable panels. The wall painting is transient and ephemeral. It is fugitive, like the lost world of Song dynasty painting, like the victims of conflict, like the drowned refugees.

Guan Wei likes to invent histories, alternative versions of human evolution that parody or illuminate what might actually have happened. Such histories are presented in a fanciful narrative sequence, with key elements worked and reworked with whimsical ingenuity, as in the artist's early series, *The Great War of the Eggplant* (1994). Creative beginnings are celebrated, tragic extinctions lamented, as in the *Test Tube Baby* (1993) and *Dodon't* (1997) series. In recent works the artist's concern with what might have happened and what might yet happen, for better or worse, has turned overtly, if still ironically, to the issues confronting human societies at the present time, including the displacement of people and environmental damage. As the artist presents such problems, they become aspects of the global disharmony that is a longterm historical legacy of the same restless, hungry, adventurous human energies that produced maps.

Mapocalypse (2006), with its characteristically jokey title, expands this theme explicitly into the sphere of contemporary geopolitics. Or should it be 'spheres'? Two opposing globes stand against a photocopy of the Kyoto Protocol, suggesting the division on the question of global warming that threatens the welfare of all. Science, politics and the theatre of power are indivisible in Guan Wei's installation, which flanks the conference table with twenty bureaucratic files that convey hermetic informaton. In a meeting that is no meeting, with information that does not inform, the cosmos of the future becomes a conflict site, a choice of two. The spatial arrangement creates another fantastical map, going nowhere. But there might just be time.

Guan Wei's fantastic cosmography has enabled him to engage with social and political issues lightly and lyrically and to channel his inventive artistry into immediate and refreshing acts of communication. He works on a scale, making each new showing a new, unique occasion, with an intense sense of place and time. From that point, that moment, long vistas of past trajectories and future scenarios extend in many directions. *Unfamiliar Land* continues a sequence that goes back to a work made by the artist for the Hamburger Bahnhof Museum in Berlin, *A Passage to Australia* (2004), reflecting the oscillation of dreams and fears in a time of national crisis about who decides who or what can be Australian. That work was painted out at the end of the show too, as if to show that dreams may not always come to pass, but fears may vanish as well. Guan Wei is a regenerative and resilient artist, always ready to find new energies inside himself and new ways to go forward in engaging with the world around him. "I have laid down three requirements for myself", he says. "Wisdom, humour and knowledge... truly the best passages to the heart of Australia." In his work, wisdom, humour and knowledge fold into one another, charting the way.

THE POWERHOUSE MUSEUM, SYDNEY, WILL PRESENT *OTHER HISTORIES: GUAN WEI'S FABLE FOR A CONTEMPORARY WORLD*, 18 SEPTEMBER—6 OCTOBER, 2006, PARTLY INSPIRED BY THE (GAVIN MENZIES) BOOK *1421: THE YEAR CHINA DISCOVERED THE WORLD*, WHICH CONTENTS THAT ADMIRAL ZHENG HE (1371–1433), PIONEERED THE 'DISCOVERY' OF AUSTRALIA SOME 600 YEARS AGO. GUAN WEI WILL ALSO PRESENT HIS EXHIBITION *ECHO* AT SHERMAN GALLERIES, SYDNEY, 19 OCTOBER—4 NOVEMBER. GUAN WEI RECENTLY EXHIBITED *UNFAMILIAR LAND* AT THE CONTEMPORARY ART CENTRE OF SA, ADELAIDE, 16 JUNE—23 JULY. CRAFTSMAN HOUSE IS PUBLISHING A MONOGRAPH ON GUAN WEI, WITH ESSAYS BY DINAH DYSART, NATALIE KING AND HOU HANRU (RECENTLY APPOINTED DIRECTOR OF EXHIBITIONS, SAN FRANCISCO ART INSTITUTE), TO BE LAUNCHED AT THE OPENING OF HIS EXHIBITION AT THE POWERHOUSE MUSEUM.