

utopia dystopia

qiu anxiong



AARON SEETO

Qiu Anxiong's *Nostalgia* (2008) unfolds at a slow, meditative pace. Over forty-minutes of simple vistas of fields, abandoned factories and forests are shown across six channels of near-monochromatic video. Built up with moody tones of grey snow, wind and rain, this large-scale video installation evokes both Chinese landscape painting and grand pictorial traditions of the black and white photographed landscape. The wide-angled format captures things unfolding in the camera's vision such as animals on a hill, mosquitoes buzzing or smoke billowing from a chimney. Qiu's videos seem endless and ongoing. They are accompanied by a metered soundtrack sampling the natural world with a tempo which reinforces the video's sense of infiniteness.

In this work, Qiu plays on our expectations that something should happen, that some narrative or drama might unfold. When asked about the six-channel construction of *Nostalgia*, Qiu is adamant that the film's slowness, or its wide-angled 'spectator-on-a-hill' view is not about capturing a cinematic realism, but instead he asks us to watch and take time to consider how the world unfolds—of the unique ordinariness of the world. He remarks that, "as modern human beings, we are always looking for something more and something new. We are not really sensitive to our surroundings. We want to see many things, and hear many sounds."¹ Like much of Qiu's work, there are Buddhist precepts that inform it, that we do not encounter the world with just our eyes or only our ears, but with all of our senses.

Working across a range of media, from real-time video to animations created from thousands of brush and ink paintings, through to sculpture and installation, a common thread runs through his practice—there is a constant slow pace within his work, and an underlying philosophical position that looks towards classical Chinese art, Buddhist teaching and the contemporary world. *Nostalgia* is a work that was filmed in Qiu's hometown in Chengdu, Sichuan province, at the beginning of 2008, returning to the landscape of his hometown after living in Shanghai for five years. Qiu remarks that these cities are marked by great differences—Shanghai is international, fast paced and its transformations are constantly visible, while Chengdu is rural and relaxed. Filming *Nostalgia* allowed him the opportunity to stop and think of how the world has changed, he wanted to evoke the feeling of remembering what it might have felt like as a child, playing with natural things like sand, water, earth and the trees. Though the title "nostalgia" might indicate a reminiscence or melancholy, he admits that, "I am not interested in presenting a wistful, melancholic state, I do not live in the past. This work is really about stopping and looking back, taking the opportunity to consider the things

that might be overlooked, not necessarily to relive it or to venerate it. It is also interesting that after I filmed this work, the earthquakes of 2008 occurred, so this place no longer exists like this. We can never return to the past, I filmed it and one year later everything has already changed."²

Qiu's realisation that the past will never return is amplified by the work's footage of abandoned factories from the 1980s, and paths that seem to be constructed from the detritus of abandoned domestic situations. He is suggesting to us that while we can't return to a single moment in time, history continues to reverberate, in this case appearing as ruins on the landscape. Remnants of the past that exist within the present haunt this work. This is a theme that threads much of Qiu's artistic output. Central to this is a conception of a lived contemporary life, where past and present are not necessarily in opposition, but in fact, simply, a state of being. For example, the juxtaposition of old factories and new cities; farmland and new development is indicative of his lived experience. In *Nostalgia*, Qiu doesn't give us a sense of the world in transformation, as some commentary of contemporary China seems to point out to us. If anything, *Nostalgia* acts as an antidote to the continual forward momentum of progress. He is more interested in considering the human impact of change, as well as to consider the present not just in the context of the recent past, but also within a much longer narrative that encompasses both the historical and the literary. He is interested in the possibility of a human history. His is a poetic and intellectual position that understands history as being defined beyond the narrative of the contemporary situations in which we find ourselves. Hu Fang, in his preface to *Pavilion to the Heart's Insight*, describes such contemporary experience in the following way:

A contemporary being connotes one who possesses a readiness to throw himself/herself into the vast and infinite ocean, and who will happily accept the fluctuations and unpredictability of the might waves. For instance, he/she no longer insists on moving in a specific direction, nor views 'emptiness' as a dangerous indication of the end of a journey.

His/her place of origin is also where he/she wants to go, and the Fate that humanity has to bear is exactly that movement in between these points. Hence, contemporary living has been taking place from a long time ago—from the days of Socrates and Lao-Tzu.³



Qiu Anxiong's constant gaze towards Chinese classics arises from the artist's five years spent at university in Germany, where he describes being culturally disconnected from the surrounding Western culture. This experience of isolation and disconnection allowed Qiu to delve in a serious way into the classical texts and philosophy, which up to that point he had never read. It was through the distance between his then current situation and China, that Qiu realised how Chinese he really was. This is not an uncommon experience as artists move or are transplanted from one context to another—the transcultural and the multicultural experiences of Qiu are similar to that described by other artists—self-awareness arises from the experience of loneliness and cultural disconnection.

It is from here that his major work *The New Book of the Mountains and Seas (Part 1)* (2006) was initially conceived. This three-screen digital video animation was constructed from over six thousand original brush and ink paintings, depicting a world of fantasy and of curious places undergoing dramatic transformation. Qiu's work was based on the classic text *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, a book describing fantastic geography and mythology. Using the mythology of the original text, which depicts a fantastic world of strange, almost alien creatures, Qiu's work presents the transforming world in which we live, monsters and mutation arising from development—an unnatural state of the world. This overlapping of literary history and alien universes unfolds through the slow moving format of hand constructed brush painting.

Qiu's work is indebted not only to the tradition of ink painting, but also to the work of other animators, in particular that of the Shanghai Animation Studio. Established in 1957, it is China's oldest animation studio, renowned for its work for children which presented a particular Chinese flavour based on folk and morality stories, crafted out of unusual animation techniques including brush and ink, paper cut outs and the more traditional cell animation. There is not just the technical and aesthetic relationship between Qiu's animated work and master animators such as Te Wei, but an underlying desire to create work based on a conception of Chinese thinking and knowledge, which to some extent the Shanghai Animation Studio achieved throughout its history.⁴ In basic terms, Qiu's experience in Germany developed into a desire to better understand what it meant to be Chinese, through an understanding of the classics and classical history—perhaps to reinvest his own Chinese-ness with a different sense of agency. He describes it:

*This thought pathology has persisted for a long time and is almost an article of faith now. Without fanfare, it has imperceptibly formed a powerful archetype in our everyday thinking: Western stuff is cutting edge, Chinese stuff is backward. In the wake of the ever-advancing West, we consciously debase ourselves. West-worship intertwines with a kind of blind resentment to form a mentality whereby we continually overcompensate for perceived lack. We fail to achieve the golden mean, every step is somehow a misstep and we constantly imagine ourselves to exist in someone else's shadow. Our present is the West's past. We lag decades behind. This ideology is China's tragic present.*⁵

In this way, Qiu's immersion into the classics as a way of creating a position against the perception of backwardness takes on a determined political imperative. When we view *Jiang Nam Poem* (2005), exhibited in the *2008 Biennale of Sydney*, a stark real-time video of birds flying in and around the bare branches of a tree in winter, its compositional relationship to Chinese painting takes on a slightly different reading. It is not just reverie, or solitude, or nature, but takes on a political edge in its stark compositional opposition to the West. New forms continue old ideas.

The political content of his work can also be seen in his large-scale installation project *We are the World*, installed in 2008 in a warehouse in Shanghai.⁶ This work, featuring many hundreds of cast dogs, was presented during the vernissage week of the *Shanghai Biennale* and *SH Contemporary Art Fair*. The work was developed from hundreds of cast sculptures that were commissioned from fellow artists and subsequently rejected by a French production company. Installing the work in the huge cavernous space, timed during these two key contemporary art events in Shanghai, it was not only a stand against the exploitation of cheap Chinese labour but also a treatise on the philosophical problem that huge levels of consumption creates on a cultural level. As the artist explains:

In this exhibition the audience sees 'evidence' rather than artworks. The exhibition is a real life scene, the front stage and the behind-the-curtain scenes of a materialistic world. Here, the concealed behind-the-curtain-scene is placed on the front stage—from the process of production to the living conditions of the workers. All these factors are implied in content of those products. However, from the perspective of the consumer, we see only what is pleasing to the eye. Presented here is the full process from art production to consumption, that is, the general relationship of a materialistic world is shown in this microcosmic scene.

It needs to be pointed out that what is exhibited here are not readymade objects. The readymade object has semantic change as its core concept, but what is presented here is reality itself. What is 'presented' is at the core of this exhibition, and it is the presentation of reality itself that constitutes 'evidence'. It is this that proves the true situation of this material world that we have created and our predicament of being in it. We are those who are present, the witnesses.

*The beginning of the text stated that this exhibition had come about because of a predicament, this difficult situation being two-pronged. On the one hand it is a real predicament representing a short-term concrete problem. On the other hand it is a spiritual predicament, and this is the more complex and difficult problem, but what is more important for us with this exhibition is to address these problems. As producers at the lowest extremity of the art production chain, what does creation mean to us? Are we really able to communicate? Is today's art capable of providing our spirit with anything? Does the production-consumption mechanism in art constitute a trap or is it a hotbed for creativity? How should the artist deal with this mechanism? Where does our standard for judging art come from? And what is this based on? How is freedom realised in our present existence?*⁷

Qiu's position is not just a reaction to the overly fast pace of production and consumption but also the philosophical effect of this constant forward desire towards progress. Viewing Qiu's work in the West provides certain difficulties as to how we read this gaze towards his conception of classicism. As inevitably, we have to ask ourselves, what language equips us (in the West) to read the influence of brush and ink, or different conceptions of self and others, does the combination of Chinese technique and contemporary media pose a contradiction or do we read it as continuum? Perhaps this is Qiu's lament, as a Western imperative undermines the possibility of alternate positions, as he states: "The world in front of our eyes has fragmented into intellectualised symbols, vast, broad, endless. An individual facing this kind of world can only feel an overwhelming kind of nothingness. Spiritually, there is little that can be termed unified. Thus we fall prey to a profound sense of terror punctuated by argument and struggle. This is the promise of civilisation?"⁸

Notes

¹ Interview with author, Sydney, February 2009

² *ibid.*

³ Hu Fang, 'Preface 2, Pavilions to the Hearts Desire', Guangzhou: Vitamin Creative Space, 2008: 4

⁴ See for example 'Feeling from Mountain and Water', 1988, http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x7354_feeling-from-mountain-and-water-te_creation

⁵ Qiu Anxiong, 'New Classic of Mountain and Seas', (trans.) Philip Tinari, <http://www.qiuanxiong.com/en/article2006.html>

⁶ See Qiu Anxiong, 'A Material World', (trans.) Mabel Lee, *Broadsheet* 37.4, 2008: 240-243

⁷ Qiu Anxiong, *ibid.*: 243

⁸ Qiu Anxiong, 'New Classic of Mountain and Seas', *op. cit.*

