



CHINESE LANDSCAPE RETHOUGHT

山水再思考

March 29 through June 9, 2019

Director's Introduction

Mounting a contemporary art show is always a journey of discovery. This has especially been the case as we prepared the current feast for the eye, mind and heart, *Chinese Landscape Rethought*. When originally proposed, the universe of possibilities was vast and difficult to encompass – much like the imagery of the traditional art from which the exhibition springs. As you will see on these pages, as well as in our galleries, the assemblage is now finite, yet still points to distant shores.

The world is much different and smaller than it seemed to be only decades ago. Thanks to economic, political and technological progress, we can now begin to explore the creativity of contemporary Chinese artists without as much baggage as in the past and ponder their work on equal footing with their peers all over the globe. As with other traditions (including our own), we would be wise to recall historical context as we attempt to sense and understand the artists' intent. To me, this is the pleasure – sometimes confounding – of responding to contemporary art, and it is particularly fascinating to see Chinese landscapes in a new light.

I am deeply grateful to guest curator, Dr. Yibing Huang, Associate Professor of Chinese and Curator of the Chu-Griffis Asian Art Collection at Connecticut College, who is also an acclaimed poet in China, for having conceived and brought to the Lyman Allyn visions of the past, informed by future-focused artists in the present show. It is my assumption that visitors will be greatly enriched by the exhibition, and hopefully, enjoy it as much as we did in its preparation.

—D. Samuel Quigley, Director, Lyman Allyn Art Museum

Why Chinese Landscape Needs to be Rethought

This group exhibition presents a rethinking of Chinese landscape or *shanshui* 山水 art through converging traditional Chinese ink painting and contemporary experimental art. Eleven prominent contemporary Chinese artists, some based in New York and some in China but all widely traveled and internationally exhibited, offer eclectic approaches to inheriting the rich Chinese landscape art tradition while also disrupting its boundaries. The exhibited works come in different styles and media including ink painting, oil painting, photography, installation, performance, and video art. In combination, the selected artists and artworks shed further light on a wide range of themes: landscape traditions in the East and West, reinvented language and abstracted nature, suppressed histories and voices, environmental crisis, dislocated cultural identities, and global contemporary art and politics.

About the Artists

Wu Yi 吴毅 (b. 1934) is the most senior among the group. Born in Yokohama, Japan, he grew up in Macau in the 1930s and 40s, and graduated from the Nanjing Art Academy in 1962. Wu Yi was already a highly acclaimed ink artist when, in 1984 at age 50, he moved to New York. While continuing his own art exploration in the new land, he has also played an active role in promoting ink art to a wider audience, including founding the Association of Modern Chinese Art in New York in 1994 and organizing international symposia on traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy. Wu Yi's long artistic career spanning decades and countries has made him a precious, living link connecting the parallel developments of ink art and landscape painting in China and overseas. The two pieces showcased here, created in the same year 2004, respectively depict landscapes in China and in upstate New York, presenting an unceasing quest for origins and purposes beyond borders, and demonstrating his masterly, energetic and assertive, and highly personalized brushwork.

On the other hand, **Gu Wenda** 谷文达 (b. 1955) was seen as a pioneering figure in the Chinese avant-garde art movement in the early 1980s, particularly famed for breaking away from traditional ink painting and decisively turning Chinese ink into a more abstract medium for a brand new experimental or conceptual ink art. Gu Wenda would go on to win international recognition with his monumental installation works incorporating diverse Chinese and non-Chinese elements and mixed materials, such as *Forest of Stone Steles - Retranslation* and *Rewriting Tang*

Poetry 碑林-唐诗后著 (1993-2004) or *United Nations* 联合国 (1993- present). Here we exhibit his *White Squares* 白格子 (1989), a small example of his early experiments with ink and paper, finished barely two years after his arrival in New York in 1987, which shows the extent to which he was deviating from tradition while also trying to appropriate it.

One of the most radical yet universally resonating examples of the convergence of traditional landscape ink painting with contemporary experimental art is **Xu Bing** 徐冰 (b. 1955). His *Landscript* 文字写生 series, first derived from his experience traveling in Nepal in 1999 and later developed and expanded on a much larger scale, demonstrates that landscape can be literally written instead of painted: mountain can be rendered as Chinese character 山 ("mountain"), stone as 石 ("stone"), water as 水 ("water"). Hence landscape painting can be reinvented as a new form of Chinese calligraphy. Tradition and innovation are miraculously combined into one. Xu Bing's *Landscript* is only one part of his grand and continuous experiment with language and text, and his success as a global artist has been partly explained by the artist himself: "People all label me as a contemporary artist, whereas what I have been thinking and working on are mostly old things. These 'old' things in fact contain what are the most essential and the core."

Zhang Hongtu 张宏图 (b. 1943), also a key figure in contemporary Chinese as well as Asian American art scenes since his arrival in New York in 1982, has produced his own thought-provoking *Repainted Shan Shui* 山水再制 (1998-2008) and *Shan Shui Today* 今日山水 (2008-present) series. Hybridizing traditional Chinese landscape with western Impressionist or Post-Impressionist techniques, Zhang's remaking of *shanshui* in oil painting is fundamentally conceptual, exposing the paradox and irony embedded in such cross-cultural negotiations, and also revealing the alarming gaps between an idealized, harmonized traditional Chinese landscape and a much more fluid, complex contemporary reality, including political disillusionment and environmental pollution. In his monumental paired scrolls, *The Bikers* 骑车的人 (2001), bicycle commuters in Beijing are emerging from the depth of a 15th-century literati landscape masterpiece and heading toward a gray horizon that, unfolded with a famous poem by Mao Zedong, "Snow" 雪, in Mao's own calligraphy, seems foggy or smoggy and illusive. For Zhang Hongtu, the beauty of art is often deceptive and dangerous, as shown in his *Re-Make of Ma Yuan's Water Album X (780 Years Later)* 再制马远水图 X (780 年后) (2008), whose layered messages may not be immediately apparent. Fully grasping the meanings of his art requires the viewer to probe further into art history and history, or, take a step back and rethink.

That paradox and ambiguity of "dangerous beauty" is echoed in the art of **Wang Mansheng** 王满晟 (b. 1962). His *Mount Wangwu* 王屋山 series (2003) has drawn its initial inspiration from his

childhood memories of the Cultural Revolution and Mao Zedong, which would, however, lead to his embracing of Mount Wangwu not in reality but of his own imagination and as told by ancient Daoist legends. His seemingly reclusive, detached and non-political landscapes further personalize a determined will to be independent and transcending in a chaotic contemporary world. Moreover, Wang Mansheng's landscapes are well informed by contemporary art and closely related to his own life experiences in America, particularly, the region of the Hudson River Valley where he has lived for over twenty years. His *Drift Wood Album* 朽木集 (2018) is the best evidence of his ingenious effort of salvaging what seems "useless" in nature and culture and finding roots across both continents.

Zheng Lianjie 郑连杰 (b. 1962) had been active as an independent artist in Beijing in the 1980s and early 1990s prior to his move to New York in 1996. His performance and installation work, *Huge Explosion: Binding the Lost Souls* 大爆炸: 捆扎丢失的灵魂 (1993), with a ruined section of the Great Wall as its setting, has long been hailed by leading critics and art historians as a landmark piece of contemporary Chinese art. His other ongoing series (2004-present) focuses on Mount Hua 华山. Combining performance, video art, photography, and abstract ink painting, Zheng Lianjie offers another wide-angled, powerful, soul-shaking tribute, not only to the majestic mountain itself, but also to the tradition it embodies, as Mount Hua is a Taoist sacred mountain and has been painted countless times by previous generations of Chinese landscape masters. Under the guise of a contemporary artist, Zheng Lianjie proves to be a true inheritor and innovator of the Chinese landscape tradition. Freedom, as defined in its most open and brave sense, is the soul of his art.

Whereas Xu Bing's *Landscript* exposes Chinese landscape as "artificial" in the sense that language can replace actual nature and itself become nature, **Cui Fei** 崔斐 (b. 1970) started creating her *Manuscript of Nature* 自然的手稿 series in 1999 to state the opposite: nature is itself language. She gathers tree leaves, tendrils, thorns, and seeds from nature, and then fixes or transfers them on paper or panel as if they were meaningful signs or characters. In the piece exhibited here, oak leaves of varying sizes have been carefully rearranged and imprinted on a large panel, imitating monumental cultural forms such as ancient stone steles. By granting the same symbolic prestige and permanent weight of grand cultural heritage to these traces of nature, which could have been discarded or effaced otherwise, Cui Fei has created her own "anti-landscape" 反山水, which, in a different way, can be reminiscent of *Nüshu* 女书 or "women's script" that had been created by and used exclusively among women in rural southwestern Hunan, China, and is now recognized as a national intangible cultural heritage.

Another New York-based artist, **Guo Zhen** 郭桢 (b. 1955) also presents her own “anti-landscape.” In *Muted Landscape* 哑声的风景 (2019), created for the current exhibition and to be displayed in public for the very first time, Guo Zhen turns her two-dimensional ink painting into a piece of three-dimensional ink installation by reattaching or “repairing” severed breasts made of mixed material to the flat and “muted landscape” painted on rice paper. In so doing, Guo Zhen redefines Chinese landscape or *shanshui* as a naked female body possessing its own voice, desire, identity, and yet also suffering the violence of dismemberment and suppression. Guo Zhen’s provocative approach, in combination with her controlled use of ink techniques and deliberate, suggestive blanks, is entirely fresh, authentic, and convincing. While criticizing the male-centered ink art or literati landscape tradition that reinforces a patriarchal order, a radically new, gendered Chinese landscape defends itself as both the source and site of production, nourishment, growth, and salvation, all envisioned and outlined from a distinctively Chinese feminist perspective.

A rigorously trained ink artist based in Nanjing, China, with a strong fresco painting background, **Mao Xiaojian** 毛晓剑 (b. 1970) has also explored the constantly shifting boundaries of the landscape tradition and the threats it has to wrestle with in a contemporary context. His *Building a Hut in the Human Realm* 结庐在人境 (2016) and *Uncovered Landscape* 未被覆盖的山水 (2016) dramatically contradict each other. Whereas the former presents a more traditionalist, harmonious space of “emptiness” 空 and “no self” 无我, the latter is much more expressive and experimental, foretelling the possible fate of the traditional landscape collapsing under external assaults. But, in the end, it appears that Mao Xiaojian has upheld his belief in the landscape’s own resilient strength of sustaining such assaults and traumas. For Mao Xiaojian, Chinese ink painting and landscape tradition remains vibrant and ever relevant, providing vastly unexplored and unrealized possibilities.

Similarly, **Wang Ai** 王艾 (b. 1971), who currently lives and works in Beijing, embarked on a long, zigzagging journey of self-discovery, changing from a young avant-garde poet and writer in the 1990s into a contemporary artist re-embracing Chinese landscape tradition yet also highlighting its predicaments and impending crises. His series, *Flying Over Ancient Landscapes* 飞越古山水 (2009-present), applies mixed media on paper, juxtaposing ancient landscapes with modern flying machines: military helicopters, fighter jets or bombers hovering above or flying over the former. Such surreal encounters in the new millennium easily subvert the comfort zone of traditional Chinese landscape. However, from time to time in this and in other series, Wang Ai also places text fragments from Buddhist sutras or other classical references as the obscured background. In a labyrinth of rampantly abstract yet inescapable violence and

confusion, Wang Ai’s art is both humanistic and spiritual, possessing a prophetic power that is at once unsettling and exorcising.

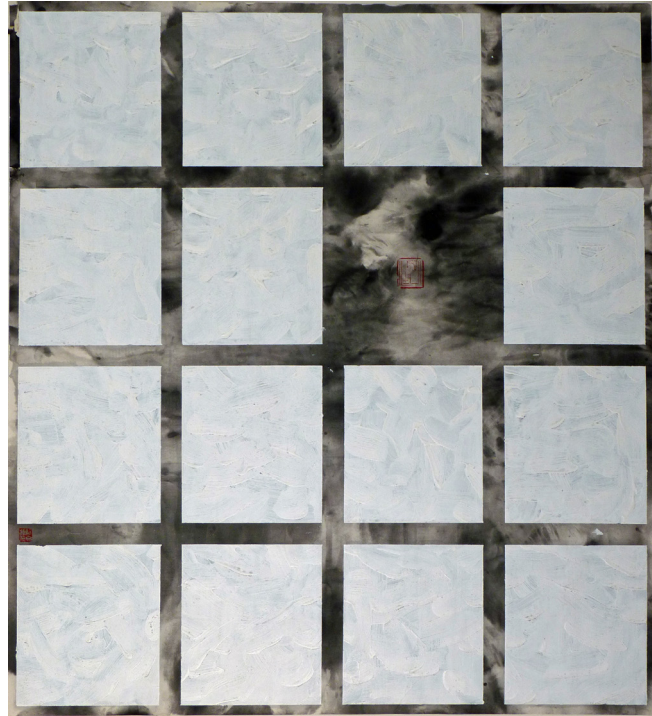
Finally, **Cai Dongdong** 蔡东东 (b. 1978) is one of the most innovative artists working in the realm of photography in China today. His multimedia video installation, *Black Tiger* 黑虎 (2018), documents how a small ethnic minority tribal community in a remote southwestern mountain region of China has been adversely impacted by the country’s rapid economic development and urbanization. Most young people from the tribe leave their elders and young children behind and went into the cities to look for work, with no intent to return. This tribe is dying out, along with its long-preserved collective customs, memories, and identity. Cai Dongdong calls his work “a monument in memory of a tiny human tribe that will soon vanish.” We often lament the destruction and pollution of the natural environment. However, what about the destruction happening on another dimension? That is, what happens to the ancient landscapes that had borne and safeguarded generation after generation of human dreams and memories, if their indigenous inhabitants or people are now impelled to abandon them? Doesn’t that idealized picture of “empty mountains” 空山, when taken in its most literal sense, equally spell the utter demise of the landscape art tradition itself? Where do we draw a line between landscape as a purely imaginary, non-committal, elitist art form and a more directly interventionist and socially engaged art form? Ultimately, what kind of co-existence or co-dependence should there be between landscape or *shanshui* and their human counterparts in our global world, so that we can all ensure to live meaningful lives and create meaningful art?

I will leave such questions to our viewers to find their own answers. That may be our ultimate goal of this exhibition, which is, to invite and encourage our audience not simply to adore from a distance the supposedly eternal yet fragile beauty of Chinese landscape art, but to appreciate the diverse works exhibited here at close range, to engage in a dialogue, and to rethink our own contemporary relationships with Chinese landscape or *shanshui* in a broadened, universal context.

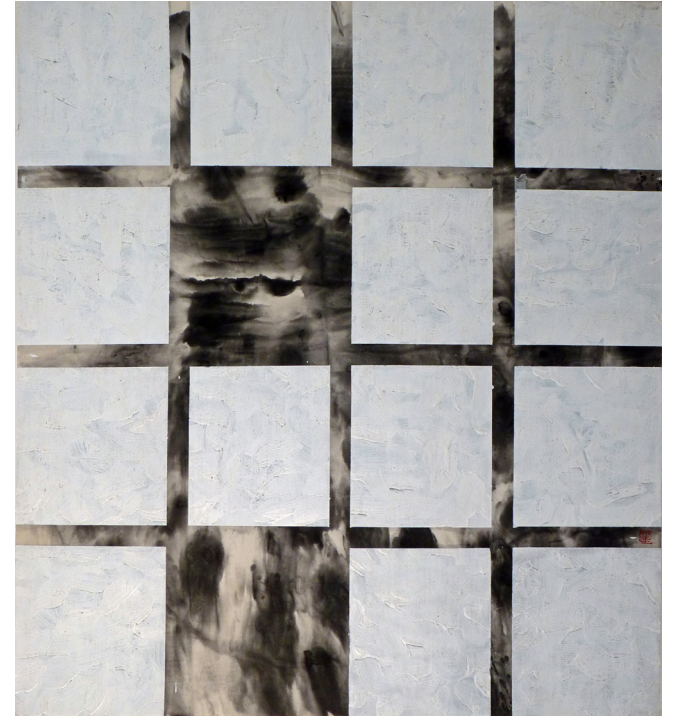
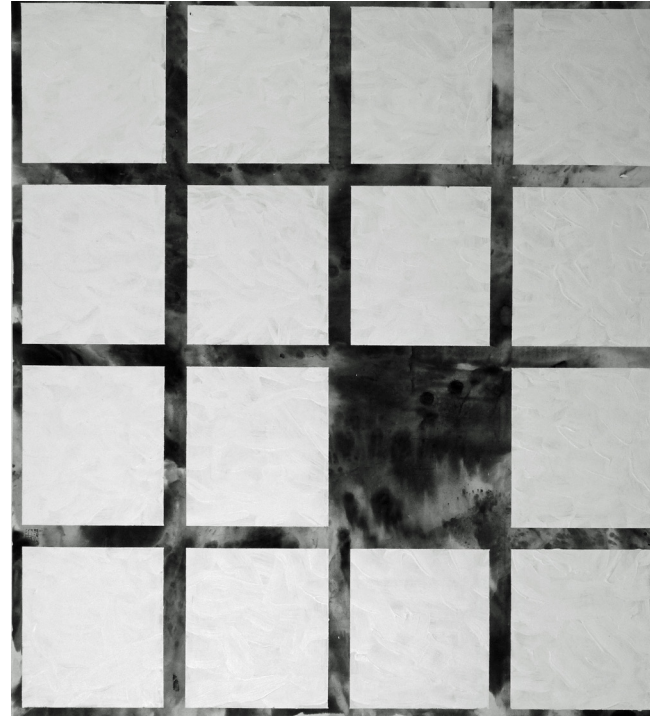
—Dr. Yibing Huang, Guest Curator

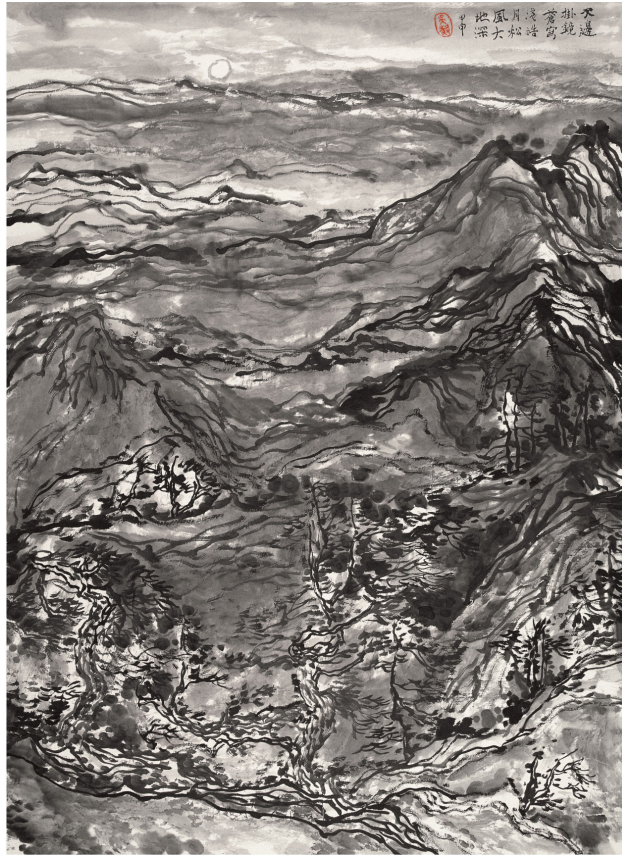


Xu Bing 徐冰
Landscipt
山水写生
2008
Ink on paper
42 x 156 inches



Gu Wenda 谷文达
White Squares
白格子
1989
Ink and acrylic on rice paper
Three pieces, each 36 x 38 inches





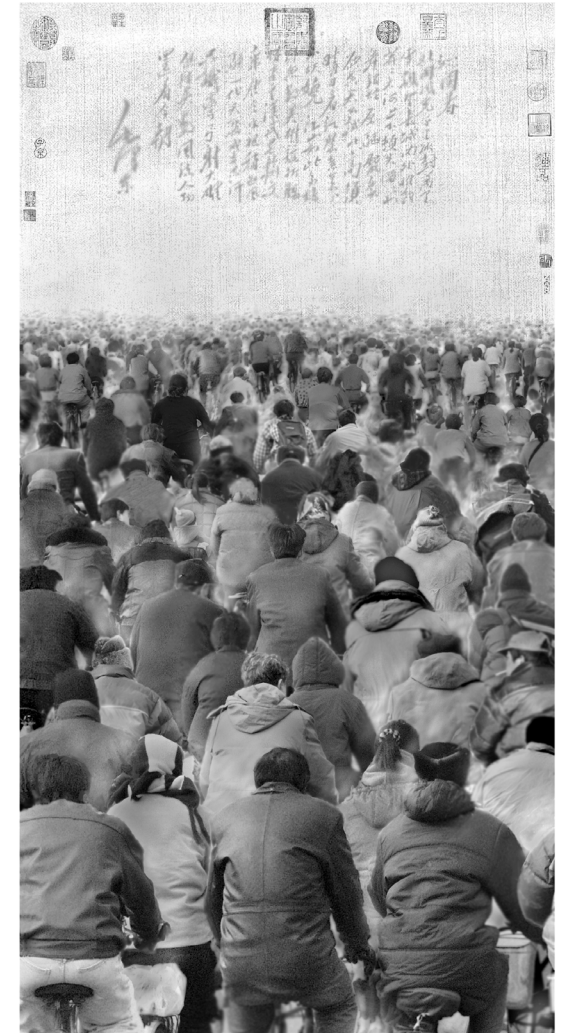
Wu Yi 吴毅
Wind Sweeping the Vast Land
 松风大地
 2004
 Ink on paper
 37 x 27 inches



Wu Yi 吴毅
Dreaming Back to My Hometown
 征鸿
 2004
 Ink and color on paper
 36 x 31 inches



Zhang Hongtu 张宏图
The Bikers
 骑车的人
 2001
 Computer-generated image printed on canvas
 104 x 107 inches

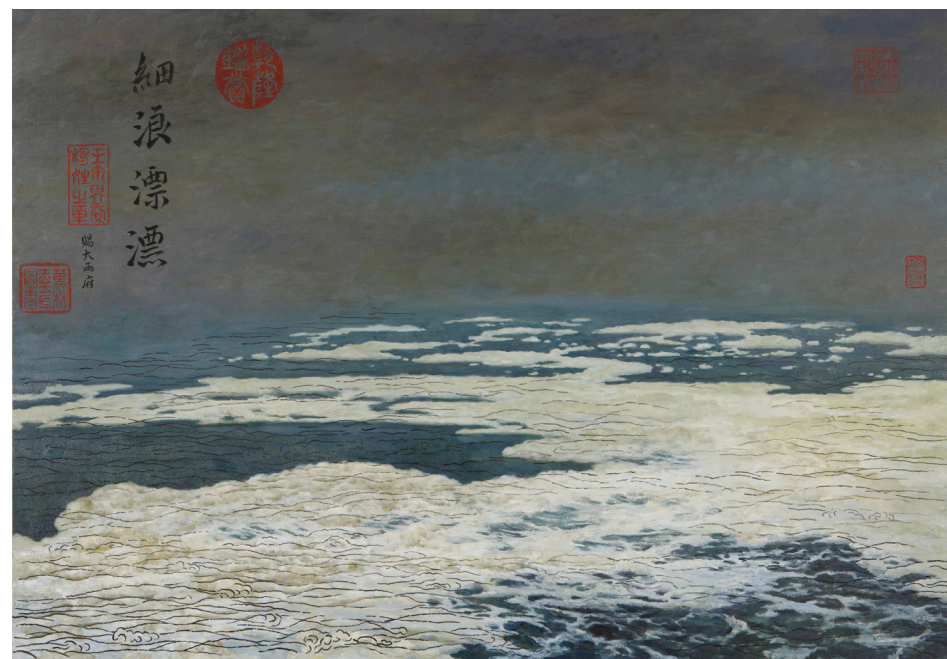




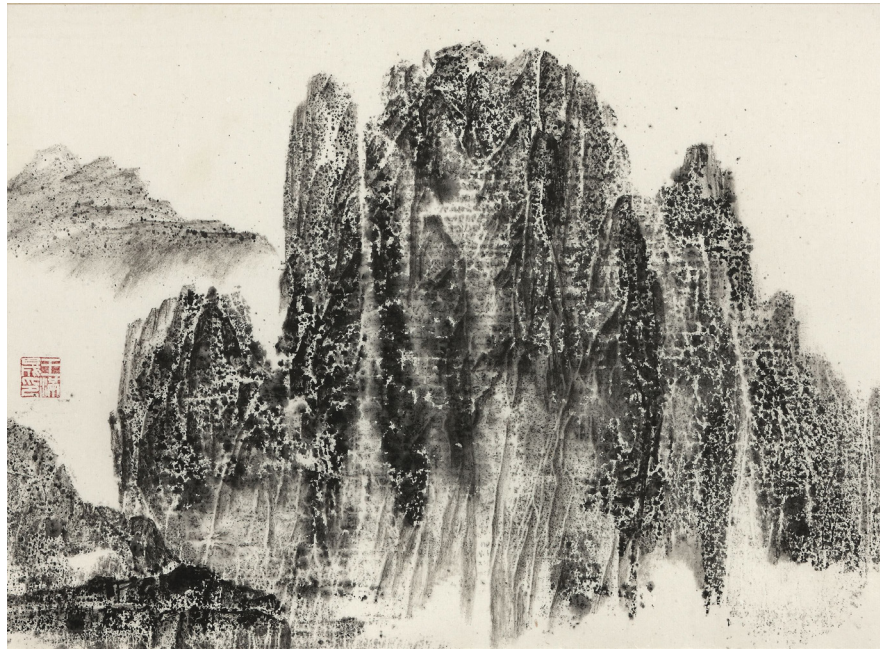
Zhang Hongtu 张宏图
 After Wang Yuanqi
 仿王原祁
 2009
 Oil on canvas
 57 x 78 inches



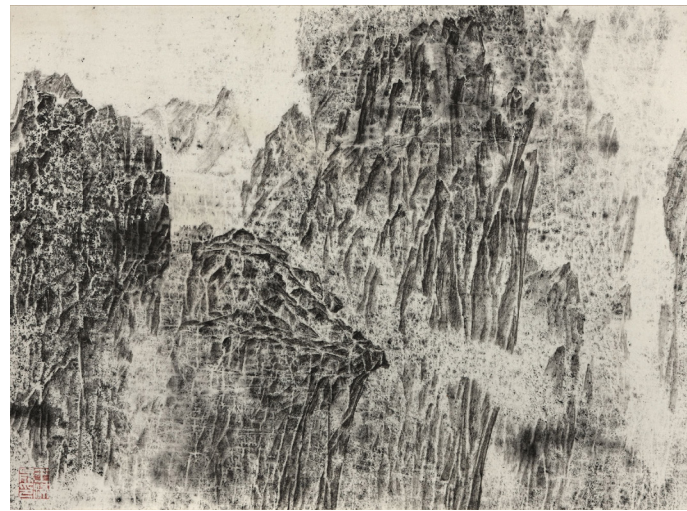
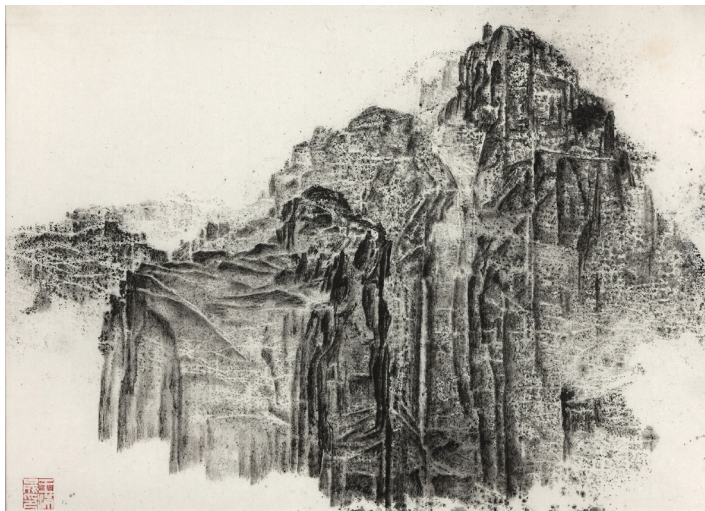
Zhang Hongtu 张宏图
 Shitao-Van Gogh M
 石涛-梵高 M
 2008
 Oil on canvas
 32 x 78 inches



Zhang Hongtu 张宏图
 Re-Make of Ma Yuan's Water
 Album X (780 Years Later)
 再制马远水图 X (780年后)
 2008
 Oil on canvas
 50 x 72 inches



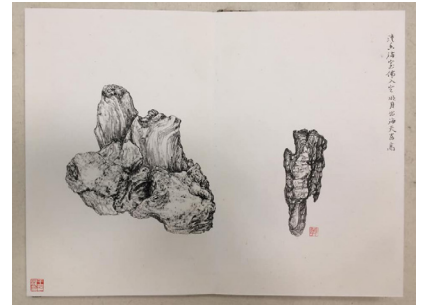
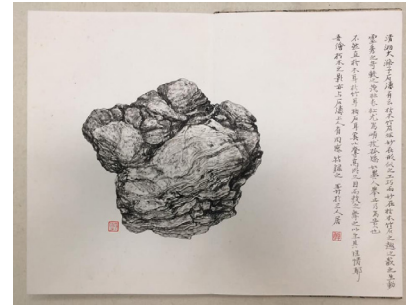
Wang Mansheng 王满晟
Mount Wangwu
王屋山
2003
Ink on paper
Three pieces, each 13 x 17.5 inches

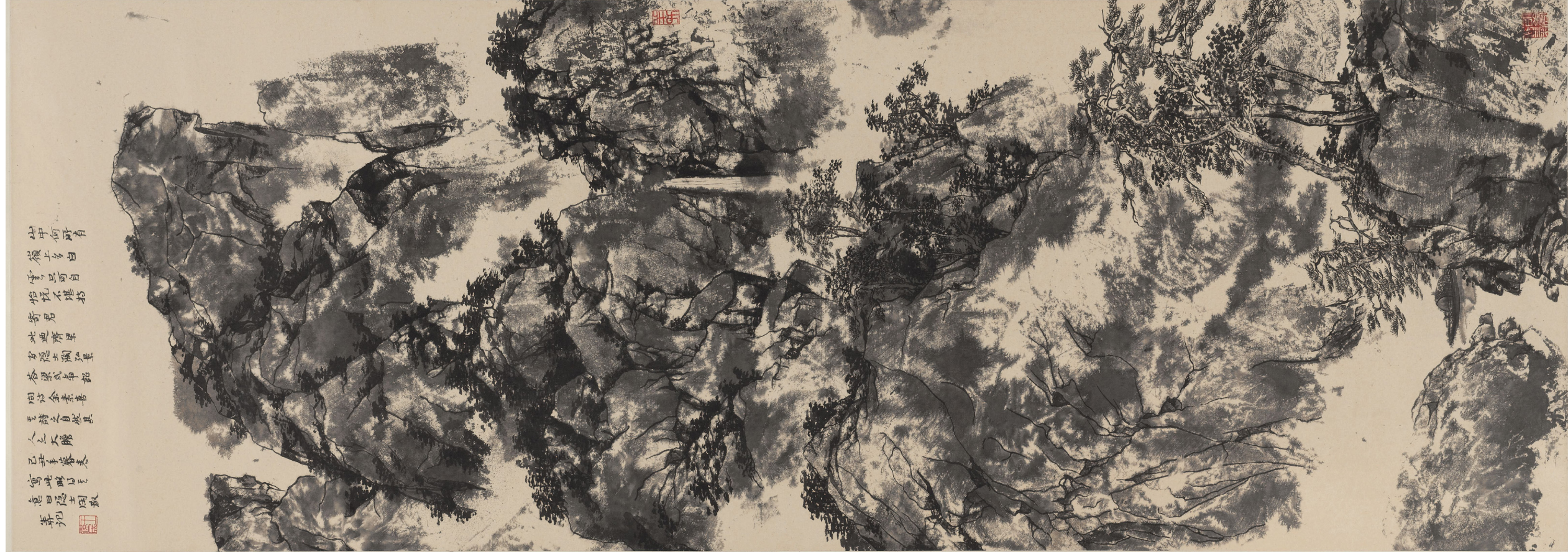


Wang Mansheng 王满晟
Autumn Water
秋水
2004
Ink on paper
54 x 27 inches



Wang Mansheng 王满晟
Drift Wood Album
 朽木集
 2018
 Ink on paper
 Album on 11 leaves, each 13 x 17 inches





山中何所有
嶺上多白雲
只可自怡悅
不堪持寄君
此西齊東
君隱士陶公筆
蒼梁氣節詔
同沾余素喜
至時之自空
人之大膽
已非華嶽卷
寫此時日
意曰隱士陶散
年九

Wang Mansheng 王满晟
Hermit in the Mountain
隐士闲散
2009
Ink on paper
82 x 31.5 inches



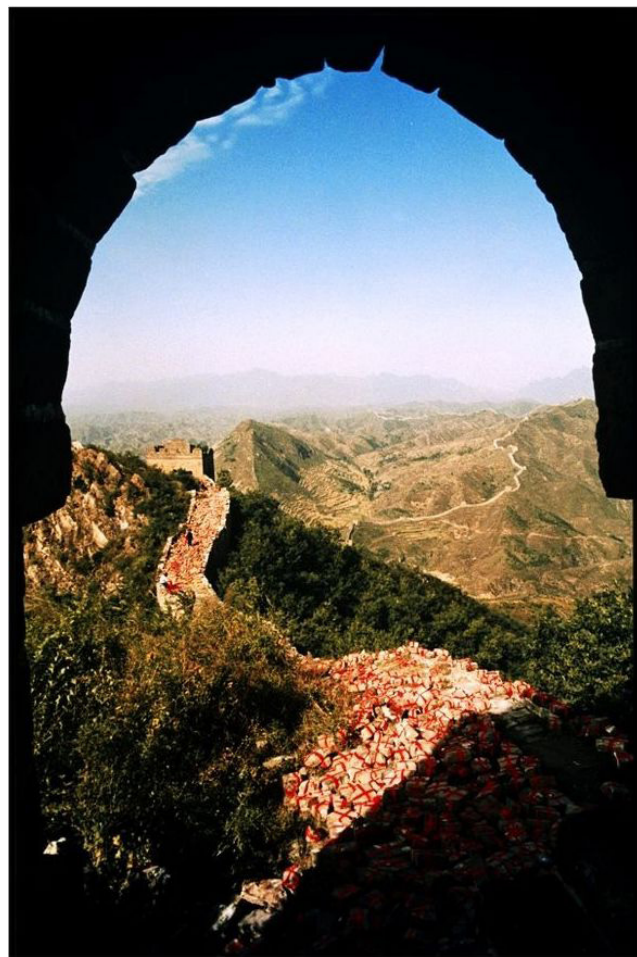
Zheng Lianjie 郑连杰
Mount Hua Project: Snow
华山计划：雪
2006
Video performance
14 minutes



Zheng Lianjie 郑连杰
Mount Hua Project: Ode to the Mountain
华山计划：山颂
2006
Video performance
7 minutes



Zheng Lianjie 郑连杰
Mount Hua Series: Blue Dream #11
华岳系列：蓝梦11号
2015
Ink and acrylic on rice paper
27 x 54 inches



Zheng Lianjie 郑连杰
Huge Explosion: Binding the Lost Souls
 大爆炸：捆扎丢失的灵魂
 1993
 Performance and installation
 C-type print
 Two pieces, each 59 x 39 inches



Zheng Lianjie 郑连杰
Tao of Mount Hua: Beyond the Image #2
 华山经：超以象外篇，2号
 2007
 C-type print
 64 x 89 inches



Cui Fei 崔斐
Manuscript of Nature I
自然的手稿 I
1999
Mixed media on panel
96 x 48 inches



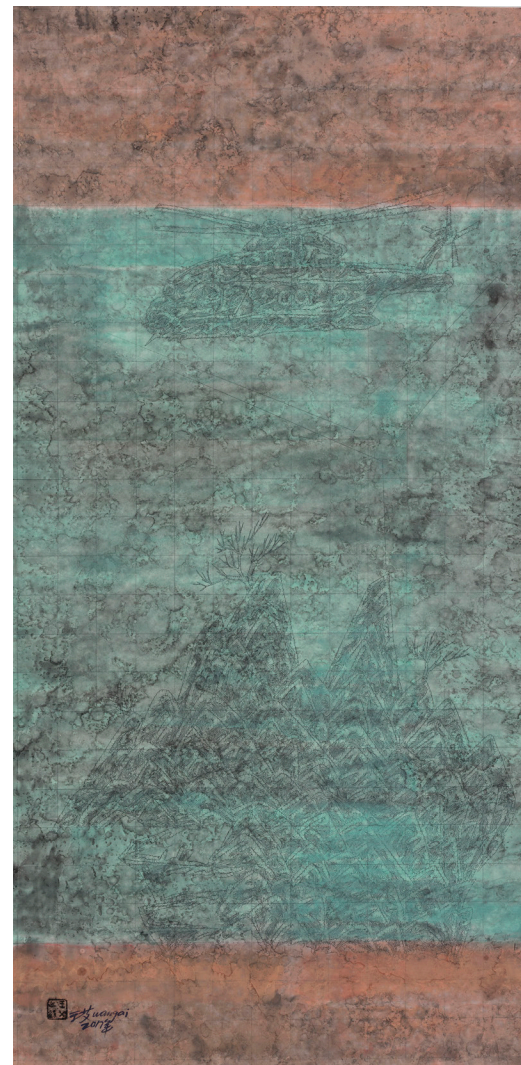
Guo Zhen 郭桢
Muted Landscape
哑声的风景
2019
Ink on paper and mixed media installation
73 x 118 x 14 inches



Mao Xiaojian 毛晓剑
Uncovered Landscape
 未被覆盖的山水
 2016
 Ink and color on paper
 55 x 28 inches



Mao Xiaojian 毛晓剑
Building a Hut in the Human Realm
 结庐在人境
 2016
 Ink on paper
 54 x 24 inches



Wang Ai 王艾
2017 Flying Over Ancient Landscapes 1
 2017 飞越古山水 1
 2017
 Mixed media on paper
 54 x 27 inches



Wang Ai 王艾
2017 Flying Over Ancient Landscapes 2
 2017 飞越古山水 2
 2017
 Mixed media on paper
 54 x 27 inches



Cai Dongdong 蔡东东
Black Tiger
黑虎
2018
Video
22 minutes

Participating Artists (in alphabetic order)

Cai Dongdong 蔡东东

Cui Fei 崔斐

Gu Wenda 谷文达

Guo Zhen 郭桢

Mao Xiaojian 毛晓剑

Wang Ai 王艾

Wang Mansheng 王满晟

Wu Yi 吴毅

Xu Bing 徐冰

Zhang Hongtu 张宏图

Zheng Lianjie 郑连杰



625 Williams Street • New London, CT 06320
860.443.2545 • www.lymanallyn.org

Front: Zhang Hongtu, *The Bikers (detail)*, 2001, computer-generated image printed on canvas, 104 x 107 inches.

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