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Qiu Anxiong: New Book of Mountain and Seas

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AFTER FOUR YEARS planning, Part 3 of new media artist, Qiu Anxiong's animated trilogy, *New Book of Mountains and Seas*, which began life in 2006 and is inspired by the classical Chinese text, *Shan Hai Jing* (Classic of the Mountains and Seas) is at last beginning to take shape. The classical text is a fabled evolutionary account of the geography and culture of pre-Qin China. Anxiong's retelling, which employs an ink-wash style reminiscent of traditional Chinese drawings, chronicles a world rapidly succumbing to industrial development, social change and environmental destruction, a world where ideological differences lead inevitably to conflict and war.

New Book of the Mountains and Seas is a modern day morality tale with Part 1 concerning itself with ideological conflict and Part 2 delivering a vision of a post-apocalyptic waste land where industrialisation and mechanised farming has ravaged the land and genetic engineering has led to a moral vacuum. The trilogy offers a stinging critique of modernisation that has sacrificed social cohesion on the altar of a so-called progress.

Anxiong has also explored these themes in the 15-minute animations, *Minguo Landscape* (2007) and *Temptation of the Land* (2009) where the modern history of China has come under close scrutiny; the Japanese invasion, civil war and the rise of communism, are all obliquely critiqued in the artist's signature almost lyrical dream-like style which seems to exhibit a nostalgic longing for a lost, golden age. Social progress in China is estimated to have lifted 600 million out of poverty but it has come at a terrible environmental and social cost, Anxiong suggests.

Anxiong, with his lyrical aesthetic, has rapidly become one of the rising stars of Chinese art with a practice that easily migrates from painting to video while being anchored in a black and white ink-brush painting technique, which he has made his own. His obvious concerns for society are also explored in large-scale installations and socially concerned exhibitions under the artist collective, *Museum of the Unknown*, which he started in 2007.

The animated narratives are unmistakably dark but the bleak imagery Anxiong employs is subtly camouflaged by a lightness of touch, a fluidity of execution and a fertile, inventive humour that rescues the work from becoming maudlin or sentimental; elephants with large flapping ears metamorphose into tanks, disciplined avian hawks with wings tucked close to bodies masquerade as fighter jets on the deck of an aircraft carrier which itself evolves into a living island, multi-winged birds fly like helicopters, disembodied limbs cavort through the landscape with disarming naiveté. *New Book of Mountains and Seas*, Part 3 continues Anxiong's examination of social disintegration brought about through progress but this time with a political edge. 'It is important that I do something different,' he said from his home in Shanghai.

From next month (10 December to April 2014), *New Book of the Mountains and Seas* Part 1 (2006) will be exhibited in New York's Metropolitan Museum's huge exhibition, *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China*, along with three other Anxiong animations, *In the Sky* (2005), *Flying South* (2006) and *Temptation of the Land* (2009) all of which the museum owns. The exhibition has been described by the Met curator Maxwell Hearn as a 'landmark exhibition'

and sees Anxiong rubbing metaphorical shoulders with such art heavy weights as Xu Bing, Ai Weiwei and Zhang Huan as well as his close friend, the Chinese auteur filmmaker, Yang Fudong.

Today Anxiong lives in a modest apartment in Zhongshan Park a few kilometres west of central Shanghai – Yang Fudong lives in the same complex. To an outsider it may seem very middle class and urban, and it is, but it is also conveniently close to East China Normal University, where Anxiong now teaches art and animation two days a week. Until recently, his studio was one cramped room in this apartment and his early stop-go animation process – where he would create thousands of acrylic-wash drawings which were then individually photographed before being uploaded into a computer animation programme – often dictated that every surface in the room was spread thick with the beautifully delicate and imaginative drawings. Book of Mountains and Seas Part 1 (2006-08) was put together from several thousand individual acrylic-wash drawings made on over one thousand canvases, Anxiong estimates.

When we spoke by telephone Anxiong was in the middle of relocating his computer equipment from his home where he has worked for several years, to a relatively spacious studio that he began renting recently. The new studio is in the rapidly expanding Taopu Arts Space, an industrial area North West of central Shanghai. Taopu, with its old factories and its industrial grunge is rapidly becoming Shanghai's newest arts district and one that local artists believe will grow to rival Beijing's 798 – Laurenz Helbling's Shanghart Gallery has a huge storage facility there which he opens to the public.

The disused paint factory had a vacant floor so Anxiong and ten other artists sub-divided it into smaller spaces leaving him with a 150 square metre space which, 'is enough for me', and which will allow Part 3 of New Book of Mountains and Seas, to rapidly progress. His fertile imagination is already filling pages of notebooks with ideas that flood across the pages in a graphic novel like style.

The next step for Anxiong will be to paint in monochrome acrylic directly onto canvases, a technique Anxiong always uses and one which cleverly mimics and captures the delicacy of traditional Chinese landscape painting: thousands of paintings are needed for each animation and each individual finished frame is quickly photographed before being altered like a palimpsest – with areas erased with a damp cloth and reused only to emerge as the next frame in the narrative. Nebulous shapes emerge from the swirling grey washes, mountains rise and collapse back beneath soaring skyscrapers, figures take shape, fade, reform, and dissolving back into infinite misty depths as the narrative progresses. Narrative and technique seem held in perfect equilibrium overlaid with a sound track that supplies a rich conceptual depth.

The importance of music and sound to create mood and tension and to add a dramatic counterpoint to the on-screen drama had always been a critical ingredient for Anxiong. For several years he has been collaborating with musician friends on the sound tracks of his films, notably Ou Bo, whom he knew from Chengdu and more recently with composer Jin Wang, whom he met through Yang Fudong. Wang had written scores for Fudong's, Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest and Strange Paradise.

After graduating from the Sichuan Art Academy in 1993 Anxiong and a friend opened a small bar in the Yulin neighbourhood of the city's artist quarter. The Little Bar, as it was known, was close to many studios and quickly became the place for artists and musicians to congregate and the bar became a venue for the nascent underground music scene. Anxiong and Bo used to play music together in the bar. In those early days Zhang Xiaogang was a regular at the bar. 'It was little more than one room opening off the street but it was always packed and full of music. And we just open it. It was very simple.'

After several months of roaring trade his business partner took off for Tibet and Anxiong, needing to escape the rigours of being the sole owner sold the bar to Zhang Xiaogang's first wife, the affable Tang Lei who still owns it today and which continues to flourish even though the live music has relocated to larger premises close by, Little Bar 2.

With the sounds of underground music filling his head Anxiong moved to Germany for six years to study painting at the Fine Arts Department in the Kunsthochschule of Kassel University where his training in traditional Chinese painting became exposed to western modernism. It was while in Germany that he first encountered the simple animations of South African artist, William Kentridge. 'After I saw Kentridge's animation, I really had a feeling that maybe I can do this. Also in Kassel I saw students make animation work and I could see the possibilities. Back then I was poor, there was little money and also at that time I was not familiar with computer and digital things. When I returned to China in 2003 and a teaching job at Shanghai Normal University, I was able to buy a camera and computer and I started to experiment with animation,' he said.

It is hard to reconcile the image of a youthful avant-garde Anxiong, and his lust for music and crowded bars with the devout Buddhist and Confucian we encounter today where filial virtue, respect for tradition and a deep concern for social harmony play key roles in both his life and work. Over the years the impatience of youth has succumbed to a meditative and humanistic view of life; for example every morning begins with a strict regimen of meditation.

Buddhism has given Anxiong's life a spiritual depth. He remains a vegetarian and has a deep empathy for all species, the latter a theme that he explored in the installation Zoo shown in 2011 at Shenzhen's OCT Contemporary Art Terminal. In Zoo, paintings and sculptures of animals examine the meaning of captivity in different cultures. International Shanghai based contemporary art collector, Budi Tek bought The Doubter component of Zoo, a sculpture of an anthropomorphic chimpanzee in a small cage. The chimp appears to be dead and may, or may not, have committed suicide; at its feet is a copy of the Bible and Darwin's, On the Origin of Species. 'The whole thing is laughably absurdist,' Anxiong said. The Doubter will go on show later this year when Tek opens his vast private art museum, Yuz Shanghai on the banks of the Huangpu River.

Anxiong's work certainly tends towards the absurdist but not in terms of investigating a meaningless and pointless world, but rather in how we engage with a world that is evolving too fast to comprehend. Ultimately it seeks to reconcile mankind's disregard for the didactic value of history, with the imperative of what is a false evolutionary progress. And this is nowhere more acutely felt than in the animation, Temptation of the Land, which follows the history of modern day China and poses the question, is mankind any better off for rejecting a spiritual dimension to life in pursuit of collective advancement?

Several years ago Anxiong launched the artist collective, Museum of Unknown a nebulous concept that crosses over between mainstream art exhibition and socially concerned installation. With anywhere between 15 and 20 artists at any one time working in the collective, artists are free to drop in and drop out. 'Museum of Unknown can be many different things. It is a communication platform, social meditation, and an examination of China's social problems. Currently we are showing work in Beijing that focuses on migrants from the countryside and the relationship between the city and the body. Decision about what the collective concentrates on is made in a truly democratic way,' he said.

The priority for Anxiong in the coming year is to finish Part 3 of New Book of Mountains and Seas and there are two overseas residencies, one in Switzerland and one in San Francisco, US. 'New Book could well evolve into a 3-D piece,' he said, and it will also have a political edge that will explore more than just the despoliation of the environment, but also that of the Chinese political system. It is a risky strategy and one that could well bring Anxiong himself under increased scrutiny in a country where the line for artists between what is, and what is not, possible is kept deliberately vague.

When I ask if this approach might attract unwelcome attention he replied with typical ingenuous naivety, 'I am not sure. I do not know. But I must do something different,' he said.

BY MICHAEL YOUNG

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