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## WHERE I WORK: QIU ANXIONG

PROJECTS BY MICHAEL YOUNG FROM SEPT/OCT 2012

CHINA

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Qiu Anxiong in his Shanghai apartment. Photo by Michael Young for *ArtAsiaPacific*.

Zhongshan Park is a typical new Chinese residential area a few kilometers west of central Shanghai. There are several high-rise apartment blocks clustered around water features, mature trees and safe play areas for children. Balconies bristle with satellite TV dishes and security guards loaf on street corners. This is as middle-class as one can get in a rapidly modernizing China. The upper-level apartments here command premium prices for their views, but animation and installation artist Qiu Anxiong lives on the first floor, having recently bought into the complex based on the advice of his good friend and neighbor, filmmaker Yang Fudong.

It seems incongruous that an artist whose view of China's race toward commercialism is colored by an apocalyptic pessimism should live and work in such an environment. But Qiu points out that the location is five convenient minutes from East China Normal University, where he teaches art and animation. He lives here with his wife and their nine-year-old daughter, Zhi, in a three-bedroom apartment. One of the rooms—filled with computers, digital imaging equipment and other office paraphernalia—serves as Qiu's studio.

Greeting me dressed all in black, save for white sneakers, Qiu looks athletically lean. From his six years of study at Germany's Kunsthochschule Kassel, he apparently speaks fluent German, but we chat comfortably in English. There is a certain reflective quietness to Qiu, due in part, perhaps, to his Buddhist principles. On one of the bookshelves are several small statues of the Buddha. Qiu says he meditates here for an hour every day.

Fifty percent of the artist's working time is spent in this room, in front of computer screens. His films are precisely planned, their stories carefully evolving in the form of sketches in pen on A4 sheets of paper, like storyboards. There is little chance for serendipity here. When the narrative is fully developed, each image is painted onto a small canvas, from which the paint can be easily wiped away, either in part or completely, ready for the next image or element to be painted on top. Such obvious over-painting, or pentimento, has come to form an integral element of Qiu's aesthetic. These are photographed and eventually animated on computer, using video editing software.

The paintings that he makes for films such as the three-channel works *New Book of Mountains* and *Seas Part 1* (2006) and *Part 2* (2007), using thousands of images, resemble traditional Chinese ink painting yet narrate thoroughly 21st-century environmental and political concerns. Qiu actually uses acrylics, because they can be quickly altered. Music and sound are also key components to his work, for which he collaborates with musicians.

*New Book of Mountains* and *Seas* visually echoes the classical Chinese text *Shan Hai Jing* ("Classic of the Mountains and Seas"), a fabled account of the geography and culture of pre-Qin China. In Qiu's version, however, idyllic landscapes are devastated by industry: droning, prehistoric birds morph into warplanes, hills are leveled into oil fields, valleys are flooded to build dams; all that is good is consumed in the name of progress. Such bleakness would be depressing if not for Qiu's lightness of touch and inventive humor—elephants turn into tanks while retaining their large, flapping ears.

In June, Qiu was about to leave for Bologna, for an exhibition at the Marabini Gallery, housed in a 17th-century church. There he was showing a series of acrylic paintings of historically charged landscapes, and an earlier animation work, *Minguo Landscape* (2007), which is an exploration of the Republican period born in 1911.

Interestingly, Qiu plans to rent a studio space close to home after he returns, which will allow him to develop ideas for installations, a format he finds increasingly appealing. He wistfully refers to his work *Zoo* (2010), shown last year at Shenzhen's OCT Contemporary Art Terminal—a sprawling installation comprising paintings and animal sculptures set within cages, which investigates the meaning of captivity in different cultures. He will also begin collating ideas for the third part of his “Mountains and Sea” series, which will continue to explore values that Qiu thinks are fast disappearing from contemporary Chinese society.

Just now, his daughter comes in, and immediately the moment belongs to her. Qiu tells me how she often sits quietly beside him when he is working on the computer, to watch his stories unfold. Utopia may be illusive in his art; but, says Qiu, “in life, parents give the best things to their children; and if all relationships were like that, I think it would be paradise.”

Tools

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