

Witness of an enchanted land – Qiu AnXiong by Yuko Hasegawa

Qiu AnXiong was born in China's Sichuan Province in 1972. After studying painting at the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, he went on to the University of Kassel in Germany before returning to China in 2003. Basing himself in Shanghai, he began working in video.

Following on from the generation of artists associated with the pro-democracy movement of 1989, including Huang Young Ping, Cai Guo-Qiang and others who went into exile after the Tiananmen Square massacre, came a new generation of extremely anti-establishment artists in the 1990s, Zhang Huan and Ma Liuming among them. They developed body-based performance art and Cynical Realism, then the Chinese-brand kitsch known as Gaudy Art. Qiu and others of his generation are also concerned about the prevailing situation, and well aware of the many issues facing China. But their attitude to the system, while both critical and cynical, led them to concentrate more on their own immediate realities. They looked to the everyday lives and sense of values of people caught up in the turmoil of cities undergoing a huge transformation at a breakneck pace. In a sense they were coming to terms with new ways of being human, sometimes by disinterestedly recording what they saw, and other times by mixing it in with existing stories.

Yang Fudong, who is of similar age to Qiu and also lives in Shanghai, appropriates the methodology of the romantic movies made in that city before World War II. He imparts a modern version of the traditional story of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove in his depiction of seven young men and women who flow from the country to the city in their search for a place to live out their lives as they pursue pleasure and engage in intellectual games and conversations rich in metaphor.

Qiu has always shared with Fudong a humanity and a similar awareness of the problems of modern China. His experience of living and studying in Germany has also given him a perspective from which to compare the situation in China. He is also able to place himself within the confusion and metamorphosis of his own country to look outward to assess the state of civilization in the rest of the world.

Commenting later on his own motivation for producing the *New Book of Mountains and Seas*, Part 1 in 2006, Qiu explained:

"I have been upset by the chaotic situations of the world today and found it difficult to reconcile what is happening around me. As satire, I have set eyes on modern life's ingenious inventions and clever stratagems as though I was a naïve observer, and looked upon them as exotic monsters."¹

Launched at the Shanghai Biennale, this is one of his most representative works, but it is on such a large scale that it requires three regular screens set up side by side.

The *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (*Shanhai Jing*) is the oldest of all fanciful geographies in Chinese culture. It describes a complete world, including mountains and rivers, flora and fauna, minerals, and a variety of different peoples and animistic religions. Amongst all this, some plants, animals and gods are described as having rather monstrous forms, which gave rise to the common belief in later periods that it was predominantly a compendium of monsters. As for why the authors composed *Shanhai Jing* in the first place, that remains a mystery, but it is a valuable text for anyone interested in the origins of the world and mythology of China's early religions, before the influence of Confucianism.

Seeking to depict the confused situation of the world he lives in, Qiu expressed it through something resembling a modern version of the *Classic*. That is to say he did not settle on one particular ideology or perspective. His approach is to present the prevailing conditions in an exaggerated way, as something alien and monstrous. He illustrates the situation in China during the great changes of the past 10 years, and the situation in the entire world since 9.11, as a "topography" with the "animals" that inhabit it.

Each scene in Qiu's animations is painted in India ink with a touch that is both lively and generous. Rather than have his machines, which resemble human beings and weird fauna, moving around against a background, he lets them manifest themselves scene by scene. They appear as an

element of each of those scenes and sometimes disappear only to return as something else. One feels as though one is looking at an endlessly unfolding picture scroll, one section at a time.

The landscapes that Qiu depicts are vast, and they have an air of mystery about them. The very best Chinese ink painting by the likes of Xia Gui and Ma Yuan often contains blank or empty spaces. Landscapes and people consist of spirit, so a space is actually a place that is filled with spirit – one might even call it heaven. And a place where the very best spirit gathers is referred to as a kiba (spirit place). Indeed this is an appropriate way of viewing the spaces in Qiu's images.

One work in which he attempted to portray heaven is his study-like *Flying South*, from 2006. In monochrome, with trees that have already shed their leaves extending their naked branches toward the sky, it looks almost like a still picture. It is only the bird's minimal movement on those branches that suggest this is actually a moving image. And the accompanying music accentuates the sense of eternity, demonstrating Qiu's superlative ability to depict heaven. In his paintings, the scenery and the kiba that are the subject of the picture reverberate together to give birth to an unworldly yet wonderful sense of unity. He realizes that sense of unity by capturing the music and its tempo, the endless flow of heaven and clouds, and the rhythm of the ocean.

Qiu's *New Book of Mountains and Seas*, Part 1 begins with a view of the ocean. As the music plays, rhythmically but also somewhat harshly and with an underlying tension, an island appears in the middle of that ocean. Moving in closer on the land, the scene splits for a while into three screens. The land is cultivated, and a castle appears. Then a creature resembling a whale with several long fins flies over the Great Wall of China, and drops a mysterious box that possibly delivers the beginning of civilization. Then it moves on. The wide lands of China are developed, cities rise, and the trees and forests give way to clusters of black buildings and silhouettes of black highways. As he shows the organic natural world transformed into a modern urban environment, Qiu's subtle yet powerful touch with the brush proceeds amid gloomy silence to portray the flow of water, which is an extremely difficult thing to master.

The scene then changes to a desert, divided again, in two parts this time, with women in black chadors on one side, with only their eyes exposed and visible. On the other side are men in white body suits, their eyes covered by protective glass. Seams of oil run like veins through geological strata shown in cross-section, and machines that look like scorpions with their tails sticking straight up in the air suck up the oil from the ground. A conspiracy causes missiles to be fired from submarines to destroy the oil fields. The black smoke rising from this destruction drifts off in a single mass across the sky, like an emblem of hatred. Two symbolic buildings that tower above the center of a distant city are also destroyed. This is a dark exchange between two sides both in search of energy. With an eerie humor, Qiu has devised the technological means of this devastation and drawn them as weird and wonderful animals: tanks shaped like elephants, automobiles that look like turtles, long-winged flying monsters like military helicopters that spurt fire from their heads, and other flying creatures that look like stingrays but are also reminiscent of stealth fighters.

As the scenes of annihilation continue, the images again split into three, corpses pile up between the white people on one side and the black on the other. Finally, as a mushroom cloud rises from the ultimate weapon and a black-clad figure stands immobile at the left extremity of the picture, like a scene from a [Caspar David] Friedrich painting.

The battle over development and oil supplies is dealt with as a geographic text, with depictions of the topography of the city and the desert, and the creatures that live in them. A vast, silent sense of hopelessness pervades the entire landscape with meekness and calm. Qiu avoids the usual standpoint of critics in such situations and we witness the cool-headedness of people living in an enchanted land watching with their own eyes as that world meets its end, like the old man dangling his fishing rod in the ocean that we saw in the very first scene.

The seams of oil, the entangled trees, the city, fire, the rampant animals, the conflict and annihilation, and the constant intrusion of the vast sky and sea on those images, all illustrate a historical perspective in keeping with theories of space and time of a China that has moved well beyond dialectic.

In *New Book of Mountains and Seas*, Part 2, Qiu expands the area of his attention to a macrocosm of universal scale and a microcosm at the cellular and genetic level, and he ties the two together through his imagery. The world view expressed by the sky and sea in Part 1 is now the great void and the planets within it, and within that all-encompassing world view he describes in a comical yet unsettling way some of the topical issues affecting life at a very individual level, from genetic recombination and cloned sheep to mad cow disease and bird flu. One scene follows another – of birds collapsing in their cages and melting; of cows falling over in their barns; of males being whisked away in the heat of reproductive passion; and the tragedy of a sheep being taken off to a laboratory, where her outward appearance may remain unchanged but she is turned into something very different and contaminated, like a mutant monster. Images of blood plasma and viruses floating around within a body overlap with other images of planets and spaceships, resembling whales, floating around in space.

Qiu doesn't decipher and critique the world. He merely describes it. He continues to capture a single tree swaying under the heavens, in the winds of Jiangnan Province, and it is the toughness and vivid poésie concealed in this simple act that forms the basis of Qiu's strength as an expressive artist.