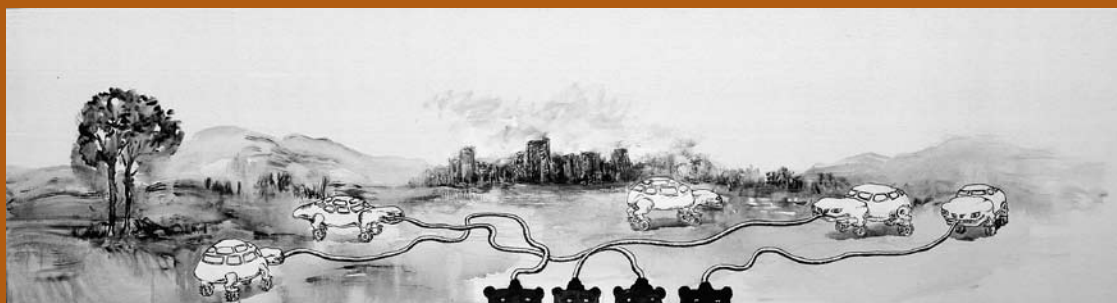


Animated Realities: the Art of Qiu Anxiong

Qiu Anxiong: Staring Into Amnesia
UniversalStudios, Beijing
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Qiu Anxiong, *New Book of Mountains and Seas*, 2006, video, 15 minutes. Courtesy of the artist.

The amorphous and whimsical nature of animation often seems perfectly suited for conveying the violent pace of transformation in contemporary China. In this respect, Qiu Anxiong has been credited as one of its most talented contemporary practitioners. Starting in 2005 with his first video work, *Jiang Nan Cuo*, the artist developed a sophisticated and richly descriptive series of narratives that culminated in the 2006 work *Xin Shan Hai Jing* (*New Book of Mountains and Seas*). Previewed at last year's Shanghai Biennial, it has come to be regarded as the cynosure of the artist's recent output.

As Qiu's first foray into digital media, *Jiang Nan Cuo* takes its title from the poetic name of a metric pattern in classical verse that was distinguished by its starkness and visual simplicity. This brief film of thirteen minutes seemed to be a perfect distillation of the artist's visual aesthetic, displaying the influences of traditional Chinese landscapes that were evident in his previous painted works. With its austere black and white palette and continuous shots of trees outlined against a bleak, motionless sky, it possesses an absorbing, contemplative quality with a power that arises from its pronounced unpretentiousness. Visually approximating the delicate asymmetry of a watercolour scroll, it is a striking meditation on the passage of time, and portrays an almost philosophical engagement with the natural world.

The artist's first purely animated work, *In The Sky*, from 2005, was an extension of this aesthetic narrative. Employing highly imaginative and sinuous imagery, it depicts the gradual loss of the countryside in the face of rapid urbanization. Swarms of insects and ominous dark clouds engulf and destroy the seemingly unblemished scenery, alluding both to the destructive power of human encroachment and to the unavoidable transition from a rural to an industrialized society. It is, however, the fluid, lyrical scale and texture of Qiu's animation that effectively captures the erosion not just of nature, but also of the delicate relationship that exists between man and the physical world.

Shan Hai Jing conflates certain themes found within these two works and effectively reinvents this Classical Chinese text, which was written some time before the second century AD. Investigating the world outside of human society, the original text is revered not just as a fabled geographical and cultural account of pre-Qin China, but also as a collection of mythologies; a



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plentitude of fables, supernatural entities, and natural anomalies. The *Shan Hai Jing* was one of the earliest Chinese works that attempted to provide an embodiment, a taxonomic reckoning of the landscape and all of its natural (and supernatural) fauna and flora. It also highlights the interest of the Chinese literati of that time in a “world concept”; literally the biophysical and socio-anthropological environment in which they conceived of themselves as being an integral part of the cosmos and intrinsically connected with its spiritual, physical and moral attributes.

The images in Qiu Anxiong’s animation combine aspects of both traditional Chinese ink painting with the imagined theriomorphic denizens and chimera of the original text. However, these classical creatures are given strangely recognizable and anthropomorphic attributes; creatures resembling turtles sprout wheels and consume petrol, fighter jet “birds” drop bombs, and nefarious looking scorpions bore holes in the ground in imitation of oil wells.

Through this combination of the familiar and the imagined, where recognizable objects assume new and fantastical forms, Qiu ingeniously melds the arcane world of mythology with contemporary events. Displaying consummate descriptive power and insight, he wryly depicts the military and political conflicts of our times; images of weapons, nuclear bombs, mushroom clouds, and gasmasks are used to make thinly veiled references to events such as 9/11, the threat of chemical warfare, and the vortex of urbanization and digitalization which is inevitably forcing people in China and elsewhere in the world to discard traditional modes of living. This allegorical vision of the world speaks eloquently and profoundly, and offers not just a critical and imaginative interpretation of recent world events, but also forces the viewer to re-examine one’s own perception and memory of them.

Qiu’s latest exhibition, *Staring into Amnesia*, at Universal Studios in Beijing, explores similar themes of memory production and references the past in order to explore contemporary concerns.



Qiu Anxiong, *Memory for Forgetting*, 2007, train car, projectors, DVD Players, steel supports, two-sided projector screen. Photo: Song Chao. Courtesy of Universal Studios, Beijing.

Staged within the carriage of a real train transposed to the exhibition space, twenty-four projectors positioned outside the carriage transmit an array of images onto the windows of the vehicle. When viewed from within the darkened atmosphere of the carriage, these images are presented as continuous visual scenery. Interlacing images spliced from historic documentaries with those of contemporary footage filmed during real train journeys, the juxtaposition of the two triggers disconcerting visual relationships in which the historic footage acts as an adjunct to memory while the contemporary shots create sudden visual punctuation marks. This effect is further heightened by the addition of abstract animation sequences, which serve to prompt the viewer into questioning the reality of what it is they are seeing. Just as subliminal images inserted into film elicit subconscious reactions, the jarring nature of these sequences create visual non-sequiturs that heighten the viewing experience. The subjectivity of memory is thus called into question by the fusion of the unreal (animated) and hyper-real (documentary) images. The resulting effect lends the work added potency and resonance as images collide and interact in unforeseeable ways.

The installation also includes twelve different audio loops that combine both traditional folk songs and instrumentals with experimental sound recordings. Working in a similar way to the images, they invoke a remembered past while simultaneously refuting it; the combined effect produces an audio-visual labyrinth in which the viewer has to untangle and decipher the different strands and multiple layers of meaning. This interaction between the modern and the historical, the imagined and fantastical, becomes an allegory for the confusion and loss of history engendered by the vortex of contemporary Chinese culture. Qiu forces us to admit that we are indeed “staring into amnesia” where amnesia is presented as a vacuum resulting from our insatiable desire for new and ever more alluring visual stimuli.

The employment of the train itself is also used to draw allegorical references to the startling pace of change in contemporary China; unlike other modes of transport such as planes which appear to truncate time by allowing the traveller to transverse vast distances in relatively short periods, the contemplative pace of train journeys permits the viewer to witness a gradual progression



Qiu Anxiong, *Memory for Forgetting*, 2007, train car, projectors, DVD Players, steel supports, two-sided projector screen. Photo: Song Chao. Courtesy of Universal Studios, Beijing.

through the landscape. By presenting the visual footage as if they are actual scenes glimpsed from train windows, the artist forces us to slowly reconsider and re-appraise transition and evolution through the modern socio-political and cultural landscape. In this way, *Staring into Amnesia* can be interpreted on multiple levels and shows how both history and contemporary concerns can be deconstructed and reassembled to generate new forms and meanings.

The exhibition is supplemented by a new video work that is displayed separately from the train on an array of split screens. Depicting three men (one of whom is the artist) climbing an apparently insurmountable ice-capped mountain amidst torrents of snow and wind, it is easy to read the piece as a meditation on the insignificance of man in the face of nature. Here, as in his earlier work, the artist perhaps intends it to draw a wider allusion to the plight of contemporary man within the wider socio-cultural context. In an age when China is characterized by rapid urbanization and startling economic growth, the relationship and interaction between its populace and the natural world is becoming increasingly strained. As a result, the landscape becomes something either to be exploited, admired, or viewed almost as an inanimate entity rather than something to be directly engaged with. In this way, the use of split screens and multiple viewpoints mimics the fractured and disjointed nature of contemporary urban life and highlights the transgression from a natural to a manufactured and artificial state of existence.

Qiu Anxiong's video and animation work is imbued with both a detached calmness and an almost lyrical subtlety and grace that transverses socio-political concerns while playing with the conventions of time and space, fiction and reality. In this way, he offers us a detailed and highly engaging panorama that spans the present and the past with equal finesse.