



salt 14:
Yang Yongliang



fig 1: Yang Yongliang (Chinese, born 1980). *The Flock*, 2016. Film on light box, 20 x 25 cm. Courtesy the artist Yang Yongliang.

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Yang Yongliang (Chinese, born Shanghai 1980) presents the ancient tradition of Chinese landscape painting (*shan shui*) through a twenty-first-century photographic lens. Yang adheres to traditional formal requirements for depicting humans among mountains, water, and meandering pathways and, also in keeping with *shan shui* concepts, creates images of what he thinks about nature, not what he has seen. But Yang, who is trained in classical calligraphy and painting as well as in emergent digital technologies, constructs his imaginary landscapes by densely layering thousands of black-and-white digital photographs and videos that he has taken on the busy streets of Shanghai and in other expanding cities across Asia. Yang's majestic, craggy mountains are actually comprised of skyscrapers, cranes, and electrical power lines.

Adaptation and transformation are not new in Chinese art and culture. Over more than 2,000 years of Chinese landscape painting, artists have continually introduced new motifs to fully express their changing world. Extending this practice and bridging the enormous divide between traditional and contemporary China, Yang's landscapes reveal the impacts of the rapid urbanization and industrialization that have swept through his country over the past three decades. His epic landscapes blur the lines between seemingly binary pairings such as image/object, digital/physical, and real/imagined while simultaneously interrogating the concept of progress and raising urgent questions about man's relationship with the earth and technology.

Two Perspectives on the Work of Yang Yongliang

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Our experience of photography's 180-year history has been of its accurately reflecting the world around us with immaculate detail. It both shows us ourselves and links us to our past. "The mirror with a memory" is how poet and physician Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. described the twenty-year-old medium in 1859.

Yang Yongliang's photographs draw upon his cultural heritage to show us the transformation and upheaval of our own time. Change takes our memory of the past and places it side by side with our anticipation (or dread) of the future. Yang places us at that threshold to show us the tensions of our present moment.

Water and mountains are repeated elements in the work of Yang Yongliang. The Chinese concept of *yin and yang* contains the idea of opposites. The *yin* principle reflects the ever-flowing and changing nature of water. This contrasts with mountains, as a symbol of *yang*. The space between is where we often construct our cities—even our own Salt Lake City lies bordered by the Wasatch Range and Great Salt Lake.

We can see our city reflected in the work of Yang. We also live in an in-between place at a time of accelerating change. Yang shows us a world where mountains have been replaced by skyscrapers, not unlike our own houses climbing the foothills. Once the symbol of eternal permanence, mountains become as malleable as the waves in his digital constructions. Across the planet, the seduction of digital substitutes the solid for the transitory.

Yin and yang also describes how opposites can be interdependent and complementary. For the past

fig 2: Yang Yongliang (Chinese, born 1980). *The Path*, 2016. Film on light box, 20 x 20 cm. Courtesy the artist Yang Yongliang.



twenty years, digital technologies have threatened to replace photography's chemical past. Instead, tools like Photoshop have extended photographers' ability to integrate their inner visions with views of the outer world. The single click of a camera shutter has been traded for 10,000 clicks of a computer mouse. It is no wonder that painting is an inspiration to Yang. Like those traditional creations of ink and paint, his images are philosophical and created to engage the minds of the viewer—not simply to reflect what the eye (or camera) can see. Yang Yongliang's work does what only photography can do: it makes us believe in the reality of what we are seeing . . . and believe in metaphor made concrete.

Since its earliest days, the technologies of photography have been constantly changing; sometimes rapidly, sometimes slowly. But the medium has remained, perhaps surprisingly, recognizable as photography. That is because it is more than just a set of tools; it is a way of seeing the world. *Yang* is form and *yin* is spirit.

Yang Yongliang gives us much to think about. Capturing the spirit of our time, he tangibly shows us ourselves reflected in the changes of our world.

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Yang Yongliang's unique approach to rendering landscape synthesizes his early study in traditional brush painting with his schooling in photography and video art. This convergence of old and new, in Yang's philosophy, is the best method to capture modern China. Parallel to Yang's path, the People's Republic of China is rapidly adapting and transforming itself to a hyper-urbanscape. The artist's work calls attention to the staggering cost of this path. In China's quest for modernity, sprawl has colonized and cannibalized nature.

Yang's 2017 video *Prevailing Winds* [fig 3] brings palpable energy and life to a digitally created landscape. Seen from a bird's-eye view, moving cars fill the roads and construction projects perpetually build a city that is overtaking an island mountainscape. At 4K resolution, one can make out small figures walking among demolition sites, but the overall shape of the city confounds; it does not match any logical urban layout. A methodically urban soundtrack mixes with the sounds of wind and water, gradually building to a crescendo as the city's rhythm fast forwards into a surreal, chaotic sprint.

To those conversant with Chinese art, *Prevailing Winds* takes the form of one of its most powerful

symbols, a Song Dynasty landscape. In China's long history, the Song era (964–1238) was a period of great florescence in arts and culture, during which artists took landscape imagery to extraordinary new heights. While the depiction of flora, fauna, and natural features had been an element of painting since Han Dynasty (220 BCE–220 CE) tomb murals, artists would not begin seeing and studying landscape as a separate genre until China's Tang Dynasty (600–938). Over the next centuries, painters experimented with form and color, transforming rocks, mountains, water, and trees into symbols of nature. Some believed the clearest representation came not from full color but rather through a monochrome palette that represented inner reality. Artists like Fan Kuan (10th–11th century) combined these elements into a monumental form, creating seven-foot-tall landscapes that celebrate the vastness and multiplicity of creation.

fig 3: Yang Yongliang (Chinese, born 1980). *Prevailing Winds*, 2017. 4K video, 7 minutes. Courtesy the artist Yang Yongliang.



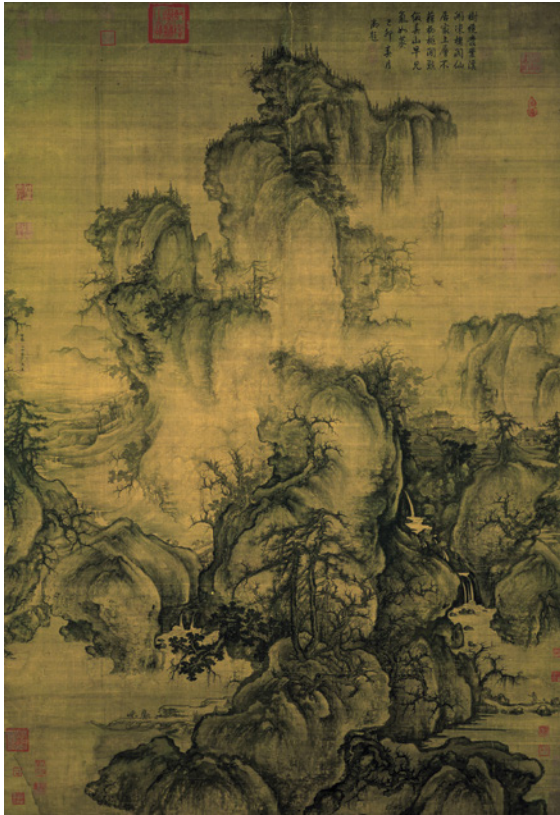


fig 4 (above): Guo Xi (Chinese, ca. 1020–1090), *Early Spring*, 1072. Hanging scroll, ink and light colors on silk, 158.3 x 108.1 cm. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taiwan.

A contemporary of Fan Kuan, the painter Guo Xi (ca. 1000–1090) [fig. 4] discussed his philosophy about the genre with his son. One lesson began, “Why does a virtuous man take delight in landscape? That in a rustic retreat he may nourish his nature; that amid the carefree play of streams and rocks he may take delight . . . The din of the dusty world and the locked-in-ness are what human nature habitually abhors.” In another lesson, Guo Xi told his son “there are landscapes in which one can travel, landscapes which can be gazed upon, landscapes in which one may ramble, and landscapes in which one may dwell . . . One suitable for traveling in or gazing upon is not as successful as one in which one may dwell or ramble.”¹ To Fan Kuan and Guo Xi, many traits were necessary to produce a great landscape, but their works shared a significant commonality. In their landscapes, nature abounded, but the presence of man was minimal. One has to look hard to find a small scholar’s hut or a dirt path leading the eye through an image meant to exalt nature.

Over the next several hundred years, landscape painting grew beyond presenting the ideal of nature. Artists utilized the symbols of the theme to express their inner mind and emotional state. For the growing literati class in Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) China, these scholar-artists believed a painting revealed the character and personality of the artist. The training of later painters, including Yang Yongliang, involved studying and copying the styles of past masters like Fan Kuan and Guo Xi. Only by mastering those brushstrokes and styles of the past could artists create their own paths.

Prevailing Winds takes the shape and form of a Song monumental work, but Yang inverts some of the lessons of Guo Xi. The viewer cannot find

¹ Kuo Hsi, *An Essay on Landscape Painting*, trans Shiho Sakanishi (London: John Murray, 1935), 30-32.

fig 5 (below): Satellite images of Shanghai taken on April 23, 1984 and July 20, 2016. Provided by NASA's Earth Observatory.



any feature that would nourish the spirit. The calm stream here is a torrential waterfall. Viewers may enjoy gazing upon or allowing their eyes to wander through this landscape, but can anyone fathom living in the midst of this digital city? In a sense, the artist has lived in a real-life version, Shanghai, for most of his life. Like the landscapes of past scholar-artists, this work doesn't represent a real place but rather expresses the artist's thoughts about China's mission to urbanize and the rapid changes it has brought in his lifetime.

In 1980, the year Yang was born, the People's Republic of China began one of history's largest economic agendas to transform its pre-capitalist society into a market-based economy. Two important points were modernization and urbanization. Yang's home of Shanghai, a city of 5.9 million in 1980, would become a special economic zone with the goal of becoming China's financial hub. With heavy investment, the city and its population have grown exponentially [fig 5]. In 2018, the United Nations estimated that 26 million people live in Shanghai, with 30 million expected by the 2020s. By comparison, Yang's new home of New York City has 8.6 million inhabitants, while Salt Lake City has 1.4 million.

This growth requires the rapid transformation of rural areas to suburban, suburban to urban, and urban to new urban. In 1995, Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas examined this phenomenon in the essay "The Generic City." Developing cities, particularly in Asia, were largely planned creations not tied to location or history. This lack of identity, Koolhaas argued, was a strength. A generic city could grow and change at will to meet the needs of a growing population. An old urban plan that envisioned a couple million inhabitants would be far inadequate

² Rem Koolhaas, Bruce Mau, Jennifer Sigler, Hans Werlemann, and Office for Metropolitan Architecture, *Small, Medium, Large, Extra-large: Office for Metropolitan Architecture, Rem Koolhaas, and Bruce Mau*, 2d ed. (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1998), 1248.

for a city with more than 20 million people.²

Koolhaas's concept is provocative to those who feel strongly about maintaining a city's unique identity and history, and Yang's work explores this tension.

Today, travelers marvel at what Shanghai has become in the last forty years. Even the late chef, writer, and traveler Anthony Bourdain remarked that it made New York seem like a third world city. In *Prevailing Winds*, a flurry of crane activity and the demolition of old architecture remind viewers of the ugly steps authorities carried out to achieve the present. In the 1990s and 2000s, the controversial process of *Chaiqian* meant the destruction of old housing units and the relocation of their residents.³ Like past artists who spent time in nature to understand it, Yang absorbed himself in the districts of Shanghai and other Asian cities that were undergoing these transformations.

Parallel to the urban changes, the Chinese art world has also grappled with old and new forms. Contemporary artists like Yang encounter issues and hard questions. What is the value and place of landscape painting and calligraphy in the contemporary art world? For some artists, they are archaic and have little relevance in the twenty-first century. Yang, however, embraced a unique middle path, believing the tools of today, including digital cameras, images, and editing software, combined with the foundation and philosophy of *shan shui* can create art relevant for today. For Yang, this melding of new technology and old technique does not distort the intention of landscape painting but rather continues it. In one interview he stated, "As long as the characteristics don't change, the media

you use to express the art doesn't matter."⁴

Prevailing Winds presents a world where human-made construction overwhelms the natural landscape. The trademarks of the generic city densely pack much of the land and seem to climb endlessly into the sky. What appear to be open areas are only temporary pauses in order to make way for more development, towers, and power lines. Little strips of trees in random locations hint at parks that are human attempts to control and mimic nature. A cruel irony is that the city has colonized the shape of a majestic landscape that once celebrated the spirit of nature.

Only water is left, but in contrast to Song era paintings that Yang emulates, water is not a placid lake or stream but a raging force that surrounds and bisects the city. One can see the erosion it has caused, laying bare the rock in several areas. This representation of water perhaps reflects the challenges it poses to twenty-first century China. Unchecked, rapid industrial growth is a leading factor in climate change, and warmer temperatures lead to rising sea levels, more powerful typhoons, and intense episodes of flooding in Shanghai and other coastal cities. ◇

³ Qin Shao, *Shanghai Gone: Domicide and Defiance in a Chinese Megacity* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2013), 2-3.

⁴ "Saving Chinese Art From Extinction: Meet Yang Yongliang" (The Creators Project, 2012), 6 mins., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZgYdQU-n-ck>.

Yang Yongliang (Chinese, born Shanghai 1980)

As a young artist, Yang studied traditional Chinese painting with calligraphy master Yang Yang for ten years, but he later graduated from China Academy of Art in Shanghai with a degree in visual communication in 2003. Yang's work has been exhibited internationally at museums and biennials, such as Thessaloniki Biennale in Greece (2009), Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing (2012), National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne (2012), Moscow Biennale (2013), Metropolitan Museum of Art New York (2013), Daegu Photo Biennale in Korea (2014), Singapore ArtScience Museum (2014), Modern Art Museum Paris (2015), Fukuoka Asian Art Museum (2015), Somerest House London (2016, 2013), and the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney (2016, 2011). His work is in many notable public collections including the British Museum, Brooklyn Museum, How Art Museum in Shanghai, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, San Francisco Asian Art Museum, and many more. Yang Yongliang currently lives and works in New

York City.

salt 14: Yang Yongliang is the fourteenth installment of the Utah Museum of Fine Arts' ongoing series of exhibitions showcasing work by emerging artists from around the world. *salt* aims to reflect the international impact of contemporary art today, forging local connections to the global and bringing new and diverse artwork to the city that shares the program's name.

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Find more information on the *salt* series online here: umfa.utah.edu/salt

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