

ARTNEWS

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GHOSTLY TALES: YUN-FEI JI AT WELLIN MUSEUM, CLINTON, NEW YORK

by Lilly Wei



Yun-Fei Ji, *After the First Seventh Day* (detail), 2016, ink and watercolor on Xuan paper, suite of three scrolls: two measuring 17 inches x 10 feet, one measuring 17 inches x 15 feet. Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan, New York

Yun-Fei Ji, who was born in Beijing in 1963, is known for scroll paintings that call to mind those of the Tang, Song, and Yuan dynasties. However, Ji's subject matter, mostly landscapes, is far more socially and politically fraught than the idyllic scenes gracing Chinese court paintings of old. Ji depicts the harsh realities of an agrarian society as it transforms into an industrial powerhouse of global consequence, showing how the changes have affected the land and the people who inhabit it. He is not the only contemporary Chinese artist to merge old and new, but he does so with particular finesse, coupled with an eye that is keen, compassionate, and often blackly humorous. His supple brushwork is irresistible as it conjures casts of thousands while, at the same time, creating a world within which the people can exist.

The show at the Wellin Museum is the artist's most comprehensive yet in the United States, featuring works dating from 2006 to the present. It includes his trademark ink-and-watercolor works on paper and silk and his first sculptural pieces—three skeletal figures made from paper pulp. Upon entering the main gallery, the viewer is greeted by a substantial and elegant enclosure, to be entered through a round portal that approximates a Chinese moon gate. Stretched horizontally across each of the interior gray walls, creating the sense of a shrine, is *After the First Seventh Day* (2016), a tremulously solemn work in three sections, its images from the Tibetan Book of the Dead. Another, more epic scroll, *The Village and its Ghosts* (2014), unfurls its prodigious 60 feet around the exterior, at eye level. The walk alongside it approximates a ritual circumambulation; it is a wonderfully intimate way to see the work, similar to watching a film, except it is the viewer who moves.

The many pleasures of Ji's work, beauties with a social conscience, come from his masterful mix of form and content. Following the wizardry of his brushstrokes—staccato and lyric, lush and astringent—a slightly thickened, darker mark might suggest three-dimensional form such as that of a farmer's muscular body; a thinner line limns what could be a face, a delicate leaf, or skinny, defoliated branches; while a flurry of strokes evokes the rush of water.

Ancestral ghosts and skeletons appear frequently in Ji's iconography; his work is infused with the supernatural and the folkloric as well as the documentary as he records with fierce, focused intensity the displacement of more than a million people, the disappearance of their villages, their forced relocation to overcrowded cities, and the environmental upheavals that are the fallout of massive projects like the controversial Three Gorges Dam.