

HYPERALLERGIC

Yun-Fei Ji's Ghost Stories of the Living

by Danni Shen on June 29, 2016



Yun-Fei Ji, *After the First Seventh Day* (detail, 2016), ink and watercolor on Xuan paper, suite of three scrolls: two measuring 17 in x 10 ft (43.2 cm x 3 m); one measuring 17 ½ x 15 ft (44.5 cm x 4.6 m). Courtesy the artist and James Cohan, New York. (Photo by John Bentham, courtesy the Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art)

CLINTON, NY — *Yun-Fei Ji: The Intimate Universe*, at the Wellin Museum of Art, is the Beijing-born, Ohio-based artist's largest solo exhibition to date in the United States. The survey traces Yun-Fei Ji's most recent 10 years of prolific practice: sketch studies, finished ink paintings on Xuan paper, scroll works mounted on silk, as well as sculptural experimentations in paper pulp from Dieu Donn . Subverting the classical idealism of Chinese landscape painting, Ji works as a storyteller who navigates the contemporary realities of survival. His visual narratives represent the fraught negotiations of human life today, when rapidly industrializing countries such as the People's Republic of China continue to develop despite ecological and social upheaval.



Installation view, *Yun-Fei Ji: The Intimate Universe* at the Wellin Museum of Art (Photo by John Bentham, courtesy the Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art)

Upon entering the exhibition space, the viewer is greeted by a second entrance: a moon gate that leads into a viewing room. The scroll *The Village and Its Ghosts* (2014) as well as a new piece, *After the First Seventh Day* (2016), which was commissioned by the Wellin, are displayed recessed in the gate's exterior and interior walls. These scenes of rural life, which shift from industrially surreal to supernatural, are displayed without glass and illuminated from within the walls, encouraging a close and slow viewing. Though technically read from right to left in chronological progression, the narrative can be entered at any point, emphasizing a continuum of past, present, and future. The moon gate and the rest of

exhibition layout stem from the artist's recollections of the classical gardens of Suzhou. The gardens — and by extension, the show — are comprised of layers of space, a series of open and closed views that become a metaphor for a universe of intimate encounters.

Despite a meditative presentation, the content of Ji's paintings is heavy. To many a Western eye at first glance, Ji's elaborate worlds float in the formal traditions of Chinese ink painting. Yet upon closer inspection, one observes an amalgam of cultural signifiers from contemporary life that are anything but idyllic. The artist gathered source imagery for his lengthiest work, the 61-foot scroll *The Village and its Ghosts*, during his time in Hurricane Katrina–devastated New Orleans, which Ji relates to China's Three Gorges Dam construction in terms of government failure: the building of the Zhaitang, Wu, and Xiling sites resulted in the demolition of entire villages and the displacement of one and a half million people. Whether Ji is referencing the Lower Ninth Ward, Badong village, or Columbus Park in Manhattan's Chinatown, globalization, corruption, and ecological alteration encroach on his scenery. Amid the lush landscapes, one finds delimbed villagers, paramilitary officers, party secretaries, strangled animals, and partially skeletal creatures. Though the imagery is fantastical and often grotesque, it is informed by the artist's real life encounters.



Yun-Fei Ji, *The Move of the Village Wen* (detail, 2012), ink and mineral pigments on Xuan paper mounted on silk, 13 3/8 x 48 1/8 in (34 x 122.2 cm). Courtesy the artist and James Cohan, New York.



Yun-Fei Ji, *Four People Leaving Badong* (2009), ink and watercolor on Xuan paper, mounted on silk, 22 1/8 x 66 1/4 in (56.2 x 168.3 cm). The Carolyn Hsu Balcer and René Balcer Collection. (Image courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York.)

Ji was educated at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in the 1980s and recalled, in conversation with Hyperallergic, a particular program which brought students to the countryside to live with farmers. It was there that the artist learned to observe from everyday life and “create with, rather than imitate, nature.” During this time, Ji had to “rediscover” ink painting, after the government had wiped the art form clean off the slate during the Great Leap Forward due to its roots in philosophies such as Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. China today suffers from a different kind of amnesia: its attempt to “catch up with the West” has fueled government-led urbanization initiatives resulting in omnipresent pollution of the environment. To combat such destructive thinking, Ji says looking back on the country’s cultural traditions — specifically the central tenet in Chinese philosophy of tian ren he yi, harmony and unity between humankind and nature — is imperative for survival.



Yun-Fei Ji, *Party Secretary's Dream* (detail, 2015), ink and watercolor on Xuan paper, 15 1/4 x 41 1/8 in.

In China, ghost stories are magical realist folktales of humans, forest deities, talking animals, passionate and vengeful ghosts. All of these characters are looped into the gritty circumstances of Ji’s work. In a translated excerpt from his texts accompanying the scrolls, Ji writes, “It’s a person’s environment that makes him bad.” The line recalls an excerpt from the *Dao De Jing*, a seminal collection of Daoist texts, which asks, “What is a good man, but a bad man’s teacher? What is a bad man, but a good man’s job?” The question, in other words, is: who haunts who? Ji’s ghosts ask us to contemplate the complex, often surreal reality of a displaced world that looks uncannily familiar. A phrase in a black-and-white panorama titled *The Ghosts Come Out at Night* (2009) exclaims, “But who knew that there are more ghosts in the living world!” “These are people in transition, whose hopes

and dreams are at risk,” says the artist: the balding street vendor with his assortment of goods, the white-clothed villagers pruning a flowering mooguo tree, a newborn baby growing up amid forced transitions. In Chinese literature, ghosts appear as a warning sign when yin and yang are out of balance; Ji’s figures accordingly warn us against the exploitation of nature and the forces that sweep away human communities in a blink. In a way, his works become a bulwark against the trauma of history. Ji renders each individual uniquely in an attempt to prevent them from becoming statistics, ghosts lost to the record books.



Installation view, *Yun-Fei Ji: The Intimate Universe* at the Wellin Museum of Art.

Yun-Fei Ji: The Intimate Universe continues at the Wellin Museum of Art (Hamilton College, 198 College Hill Road, Clinton, NY) through July 2, after which it will travel to the Honolulu Museum of Art.