

Through the Mouth of the River

Recalling the long artistic tradition of landscape painting in China as a metaphor for the harmony and order of the cosmos, *Through the Mouth of the River* immerses the viewer deep in nature where cyclical continuity is evident.

Using various printing techniques, Feiyi Wen applies specific aesthetic values relevant to East Asian views of life and the universe, and it is this foundation of Eastern philosophy and traditional Chinese ways of observing and understanding nature which provides a departure point for a new dialogue.

Just as traditional Chinese landscape painting (*shanshui*, literally 'mountain' and 'water') stretches our consciousness in creating a spatial illusion where the laws of perspective do not apply, Feiyi expands our limitations of perception to incorporate both the tangible and intangible, and the visible and invisible.

At the core of the installation is an antique glass display cabinet which further gives a sense that *Through the Mouth of the River* is a detailed interweaving of insights which together give contextual clues pertaining to the mysterious energy of the universe. In a manifestation of yin-yang dualism, the motifs in the cabinet reoccur in identical and oppositional sequences. Each element corresponds and is integral to the balance of the composition (or metaphorically, the universe) as a whole.

Feiyi does not just represent scenes of *shanshui*; she transforms them with the vitality, or *qi*, once considered essential by Tang period painters and poets, and which is embedded in Taoist beliefs as well as ancient shamanistic cultures that recognised the sacredness of nature. Without the distraction of colour or human activity, she embodies the highly aestheticised imagery of *shanshui* – also drawing on vintage postcards and travel brochures – to capture the inner energy of her subjects.

It is intuitively plausible that the photographs and prints which comprise *Through the Mouth of the River* were captured by moonlight such are their illusory and ethereal qualities. In one image, algae dances on the water's glistening surface in a celestial show reminiscent of constellations in the night sky. This intense focus on intimate corners of nature continues with further water-based imagery and delicate botanical and rock studies.

The interplay of reality versus illusion is perhaps best exemplified in a blurred landscape in which Feiyi unconsciously demonstrates her rejection of the precedent that an accurate representation of a landscape is needed to evoke *qi*. Instead, only a semblance of a landscape is discernible through the soft lines of the unusual rock formations and strange surrealist beauty.

At times the imagery brings to mind the distant past and at other times, a dream, memory or momentary reflection on the water. It is not clear if we are entering into a discourse with something remembered or imagined. The changing viewpoint and fluctuations in locality offer fragments through which Feiyi's vision can be discerned without the usual restrictions of the human eye. Only through the artist's unfolding of these separate but seemingly interconnected moments in time are we able to establish a more complete picture.

It is easy to feel that nature and humanity are one when examining Feiyi's symbolic world despite no reference to humanity and the absence of a direct narrative. Each work takes us on a mediative journey much in the same way a *shanshui* painting allows the viewer to navigate different aspects

of its microcosm on each viewing. The viewer's engagement with the work is a deeply personal experience.

We sense there is a profound, out-of-reach meaning – perhaps a fleeting vision of truth – which is only obtainable through an abstract language of visual signs rather than descriptive forms. It is almost as though we are grasping the last of such moments of beauty amid a world that is increasingly losing touch with the natural environment it is so intrinsically connected with.

Awakening us from this idyllic dimension is the knowledge that humanity, and all its destructiveness and chaos, lies behind the lens – a world to which we must ultimately return. Yet *Through the Mouth of the River's* invitation to reconnect with nature by moving beyond our sensory experience of external observation towards internal introspection is conducive to a new consciousness and respect for the environment.

Text by Sarah Jitjindar

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