

Contemporary Magazine

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KALEIDOSCOPE

The art of
YANG FUDONG

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Sitting between the traditions of cinema and visual art, the work of Chinese artist Yang Fudong resonates with the cinematic and photographic tropes of a city and society that is also “in between”: the decadent aura of Shanghai in the

ESSAY BY DAVIDE QUADRIO AND NOAH COWAN

1920s and 1930s—colonial and colonized, modern and feudal, progressive and nostalgic. Indebted to the Fifth and Sixth generations of Chinese filmmakers,

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KA XIAOXI

to European auteurs of the like of Jean-Luc Godard, Alain Resnais and Michelangelo Antonioni, and to American peers such as Jim Jarmusch,

INTERVIEW BY LI ZHENHUA

Fudong’s crisp black-and-white 35mm films enact a subtle interplay between the political and the abstract, revealing the artist’s passionate attraction to beauty and a rarified approach to the haunting questions of contemporary life.

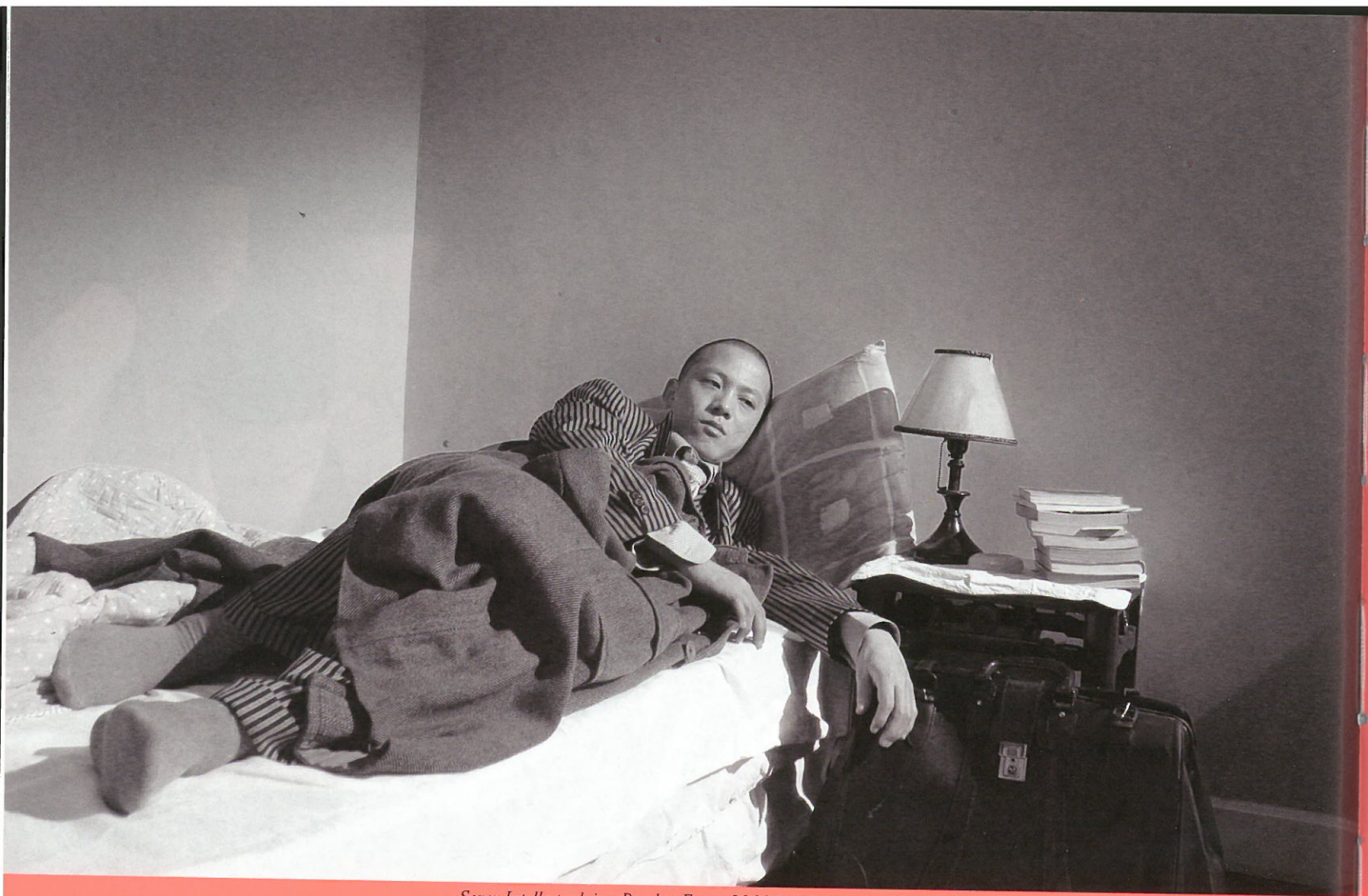
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Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest, 2003 (production stills)



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DAVIDE QUADRIO
BY AND
NOAH COWAN

It seems easier for Yang Fudong to speak about what he is not rather than determine the elements that define him and his work. Critics and scholars, however, continue to insist on identifying potential influences and historical motivations within his work, often spanning through the history of visual culture in China. The fervor he inspires becomes especially fraught when we try to speak of him simultaneously as a filmmaker and a visual artist, participating in various schools of aesthetic creation, perpetuating and enlivening various traditions in both roles. Yang Fudong himself has strongly suggested in recent interviews that a great deal of current scholarship around him may well be ill-founded, if not misleading. This problem has many sources, not least of which involves exhausting taxonomic issues between film and visual art, born from a crucial half century developing separate critical and analytical tools, a situation still hobbling European and American thinking about the relationship between the art forms. Artists like Yang Fudong, by their example, continue to shatter these barriers but scholars have, sadly, yet to catch up.

Confusion around Yang Fudong's work also springs from the unusual nature of his practice. He truly does occupy a world "between," and not just between the traditions of cinema and visual art. Even within contemporary art he sits uneasily between the sculptural practice of an older video art tradition and the attention to visual detail associated with many current media art makers, alternating straightforward single-channel installation with the invention of complex sculptural environments where the moving image functions within a larger structure. Consider *I Love My Motherland* (*wo aiwo de zhu guo*) (1999), an early work exhibited as part of "Art For Sale," the 1999 show that launched a renaissance in Shanghai's contemporary art world. The multi-channel installation features five television sets and a small booklet. The spatial relationship between them appears casual at first but the elements, upon further reflection, take on richer meaning only within their spatial environment. A year later, he presented *Tonight Moon* (*Jin Wan De Yue Liang*) (2000), a bigscreen with small monitors embedded and surrounded by reverberating televisions, creating a powerful audio-visual experience, but within a sculptural

context. Another more recent example is *General's Smile* (2009), a key work from his first solo exhibition in China. He fuses a new multiple-channel installation with older works to create a composite historical narrative that hangs together with spatial logic. The negation of space is also a tool for Yang Fudong, as in his most recent installation, *New Women* (2013), which demands a museum-style approach, with screens flush to the wall, erasing the sculptural tri-dimensionality to (mis)direct us towards the painterly.

This unusual practice created tension between the artist and the Chinese art world. His early work lived in the underground with many others until the 2000 Shanghai Biennale, the first time video art was presented in a Chinese public institution. The work was marginalized into an offsite exhibition space ("Useful Life" was presented at a temporary space on Dongdaming Road), alongside Xu Zhen and Yang Zhenzhong. Soon after he became an international art star, but despite winning the top prize for *Flutter, Flutter... Jasmine, Jasmine* (*tianshang tianshang, moli moli*) (2002) at the

2002 Shanghai Biennale (where his work was highly popular with throngs of young audiences), Yang Fudong did not receive a solo show until 2009, at the private Zendai Museum of Modern Art, Shanghai. The entirety of his photographic works were only brought together in 2012 by Shanghai's OCT Contemporary Art Terminal (OCAT), also a private institution. Why was his work so resisted in China?



East of Que Village, 2000

We contend that Yang Fudong is that rare animal—a self-conscious hybridizer of form who is not interested in contemporary obsessions with collage, pastiche, appropriation and conceptualist pranksterism, hallmarks of much celebrated contemporary art associated with China. Film—its history and cultural specificity—is not a distanced object of contemplation or satire for him, but rather represents a series of instruments in his toolbox, neatly alternating and blending with similar devices from the visual arts. This forces him into a subtler interplay between the political and the abstract compared to many of his peers.

Yang Fudong began his career making highly political work, such as the above-mentioned video installation *I Love My Motherland* and the photo series *The First Intellectual* (2000). Even some of the more rarely seen works such as *City Light* (*cheng shi zhi guang*) (2000) or *Robber South* (*Dao Nan*) (2001), and the sublime 35mm piece *Backyard—Hey! Sun is rising* (*hou fang—hei, tianliang le*) (2001) carry a political charge. However, his political approach does not

relate especially well to the more radical activist stance assumed by artists like Ai Weiwei. The politics present in these early works is an echo, a distant discomfort submerged into a narrative of poetic images. Back then, Yang Fudong was working in a very primitive context, with tiny budgets and myriad technical problems related to 35mm film. And yet there is a clear sense that he managed to create a genuine break with the still-predominant political pop and cynical realism styles of the 1990s.

These works reveal not only an uneasiness related to contemporary Chinese society, but also his role as an artist and intellectual within it. Politics would gradually recede into a gentle undercurrent within his production in the years to come, freeing him to adopt a more rarified approach to the haunting questions of contemporary life. In this gradual drift, he resembles artists of the past, the scholar-painters retreating to the mountains during the Ming Dynasty or a more contemporary artist, such as the early 20th-century painter Pan Tianshou, who situated himself within the world—we are not discussing hermits here—while standing apart from it. As Yang Fudong's work progressively moves away from the immediacy of volatile early Chinese video art, he finds solace in the world of pure aesthetics and a passionate attraction to beauty. His work resonates with pre-1949 Shanghai, namely the cinematic and photographic tropes of a city and society "in between"—colonial and colonized, modern and feudal, progressive and nostalgic. This brings Yang Fudong into dialogue with the concept of *haipai*, a term associated with the decadent aura of Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s, a city of transgression: Chinese yet international, a place of contradictions. It was a place where art, culture and political liberties commingled with corruption, brutality and decadence. The exhilarating combination of the seamy with the sublime made the city a magnet not only for entrepreneurs but also lost souls and refugees from around the world. Pushing the limits of tolerance and freedom, Shanghai defined a certain kind of a social, political and creative culture of the 20th century. Its creative energy, sexual charge and political ferment were a crucible of change for a society tentatively emerging from the stagnation and humiliations of the imperial era. The *haipai* style is typically set against the more traditional, Beijing-centred and inward-looking *jingpai*. Yang Fudong sits uneasily between both; he continuously distances himself from Shanghai, claiming that he always feels like a Beijing-born foreigner in the city, while nonetheless embodying its most treasured historical tropes.



An Estranged Paradise, 1997–2002

Talking about *haipai* is to state a historical connection with the past spirit of the city. But, even when we speak of Yang Fudong as a *haipai* artist, we acknowledge how difficult it is to trace his artistic lineage and the motivations for his practice. At this stage of his development as an artist, he has in effect built an island of silence around his work, far away from the noise of contemporary Chinese life, and only tentative and occasional in its more obvious political connections to today.

But where did this impulse originate? There are some very important clues in the most unusual and striking work of his career, an actual film conceived to be screened in a movie theater, the only one in his canon with that provenance. *Estranged Paradise*, produced between 1997 and 2002, sees Yang Fudong challenged by longer-form narrative storytelling, looking back at the history of representation in Chinese art for visual tools to evoke an enigmatic yet critical representation of China's rapid modernization and the internationalizing currents that came in its wake. These tools, deployed often tentatively here, will form the core of his more famous, bold

installation works that follow. *Estranged Paradise* premiered at Documenta 11 in 2002. It features many of Yang Fudong's signature motifs—crisp black-and-white 35mm cinematography, storylines that blur contemporary visual tropes with more traditional aesthetics, as well as homages to and revisions of genre cinema, referencing the early work of his influences Jean-Luc Godard and Jim Jarmusch. The

film also reflects his early studies as a painter, and functions to bring the principles of painting into the cinematic form through a long prologue concerning subjectivity in Chinese landscape painting. After that moment of rich misdirection, the narrative begins, set in the city of Hangzhou where Yang studied at the China Academy of Art. *Estranged Paradise* takes as its focal point a restless young man, Zhu Zi, following him as he aimlessly wanders through the city. Through a series of distinct vignettes, Yang depicts Zhu Zi's inability to find comfort in friends, lovers or his environment as a reflection of the existential difficulty of China's "nameless generation," cast adrift during the rapid changes at the turn of the millennium.

Although made independently of them, *Estranged Paradise* shares many clear and precise congruencies with the early films of the so-called Sixth Generation of Chinese filmmakers. In particular it shares an enormous affinity with Wang Xiaoshuai's *The Days* (1993), which is about an intellectual couple deciding if they should stay together, and He Jianjun's *Red Beads* (1994), which chronicles a young man's

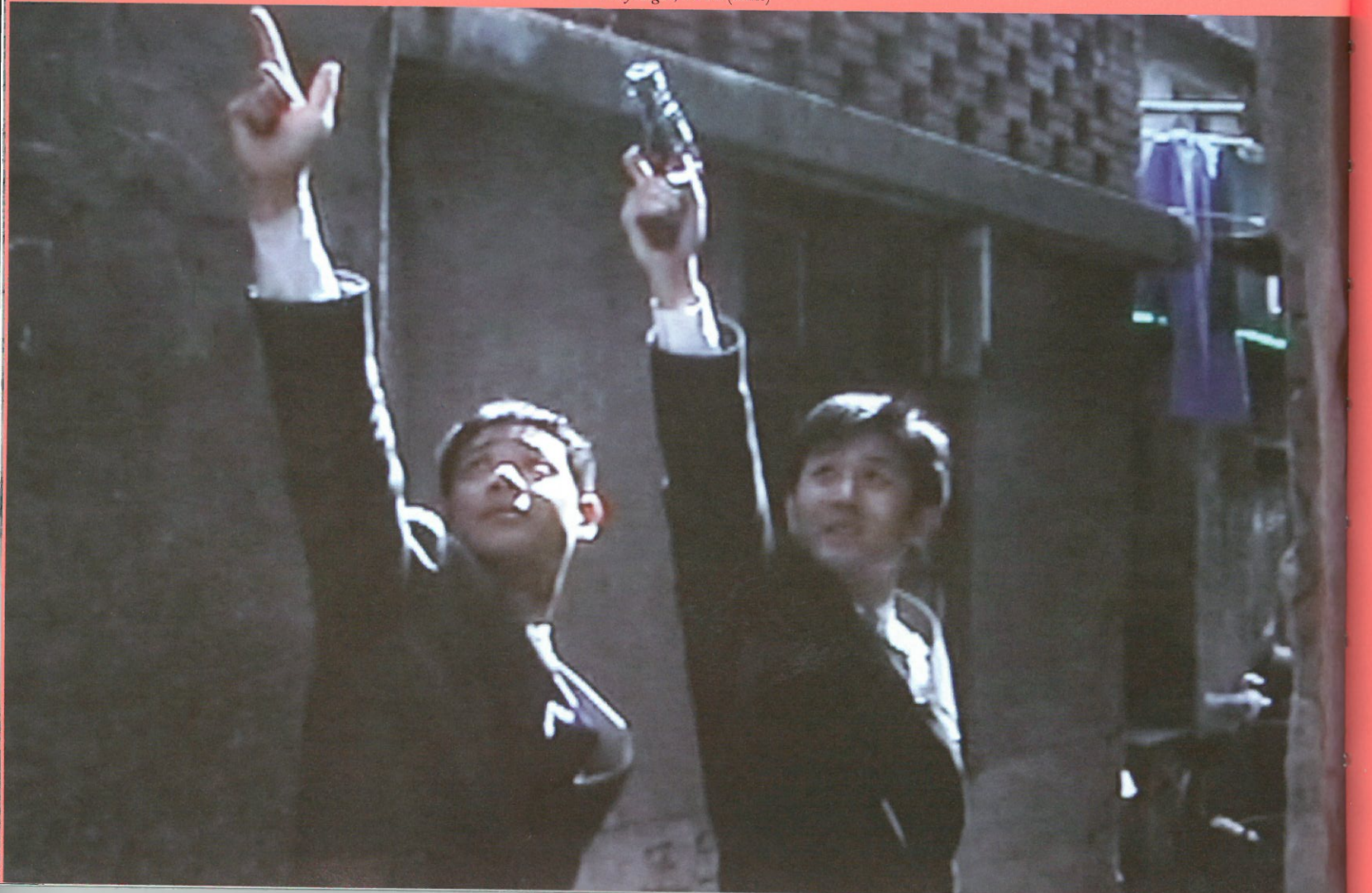


Lock Again (lu ke zai yu), 2004 (film stills)





City Light, 2000 (stills)



psychotic breakdown. These films are both considered seminal works in contemporary Chinese cinema. Their status comes in large part from what came before them—the increasingly opulent, largely rural-based and highly abstracted films of Fifth Generation masters such as Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou and Tian Zhuangzhuang. The international success these filmmakers enjoyed allowed them to exploit larger and larger budgets, despite their vigorous critiques of Party behavior during the Cultural Revolution. However, their historical and geographical focus meant that they ignored the new realities of China's rapidly evolving urban environments. Party studio heads did not encourage films and television shows on the subject either, aware of the sensitivities around mass migration and the end of guaranteed employment, although a few films were produced that portrayed the cities, most notably Xie Fei's prescient *Black Snow* (1990). After the events at Tiananmen Square in 1989, all portraits involving the life of cities came to an end and the result was the creation of a vibrant underground scene still present today. *The Days* and *Red Beads*, like *Estranged Paradise*, were made on shoestring budgets and relied on the skills and cooperation of friends. They are shocking works for a student of Chinese cinema: they don't draw on established precedents from Chinese film genres and instead borrowed far more heavily from the black-and-white European cinemas of Alain Resnais and Michelangelo Antonioni to create an overwhelming sense of malaise

and ennui—truly the first time China can be said to have had a *haipai* cinema since the 1930s. Their lo-fi, grainy aesthetics and casual approach to synched sound were also something new; Chinese cinema before that was extremely precise, even when resources were scarce. But more importantly, and most saliently, their politics differ radically. These films jettison the metaphor of an individual standing in for all of society, instead identifying characters in uniquely imprisoned circumstances that force them to retreat from engagement with the world and focus on their own less-than-satisfying inner lives. When collective politics enter the equation, they do so unheralded, through the inaction of characters and the subtraction of meaningful interactions in their lives, their languor a murmured contemplation of an imagined utopian moment hazily located in the past. They take at their core the duty, or lack thereof, an intellectual must assume in a society found wanting, a society that pushes him away. In *Estranged Paradise*, we see Yang Fudong picking up on these same themes, but through the lens of a visual artist, a painter enthralled with cinema but

prevented from making films due to the economic and political circumstances of his age. By the time he made *Estranged Paradise*, Chinese underground filmmaking had moved on from the stripped-down thematics of the early 1990s to re-embrace traditional genres (He Jianjun's *Postman*, 1995) and social activism (Jia Zhangke's *Xiao Wu*, 1997), but through a similar low-key, gritty lens. Yang Fudong brings much to this conversation; by announcing a need for structure in their artistic enterprises in the prologue that begins *Estranged Paradise*, he challenges his contemporaries in Chinese filmmaking to strongly reassert an aesthetics of beauty into their practice while also calling for the reintroduction of Chinese cinema history through his casual referencing of pre-1949 masterpieces *Spring In A Small Town* (1948) and *Street Angel* (1948) in the scenes that follow. The films that follow his intervention, though it is less than clear that any of them would have seen it, indeed broaden their aesthetic scope to feel the influence of Chinese cinema, from Wong Kar-wai's Hong Kong baroque style and Lou Ye's *Suzhou River* (2000) to post-1949 "17 years" Mainland cinema like Jia Zhangke's *Platform* (2000).

For Yang Fudong's own personal practice, the film appears to reorient him in a new direction, amplifying the themes proposed in *Estranged Paradise* to create his signature large-scale installations like *No Snow On Broken Bridge* (2006) and *Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest* (2003–2007). He now seamlessly marries artistic tropes of the past to the present, but increasingly works from



The Nightman Cometh, 2000

the position of the distant scholar with a mission to discover new and innovative ways to connect to forgotten Shanghai, and its cinema, in order to make sense of today. His new work, *New Women*, presented at and commissioned by TIFF Bell Lightbox in Toronto, suggests an end to this process and perhaps a new direction. This multi-channel silent movie is an ode to the erotica of the *haipai* moment, but also connects it to a greater history of visual art from ancient Greek sculpture to 19th-century Classicism and up to the modernist flourish, captured in its essence by Polish deco painter Tamara De Lempicka and her circle. The pastiche is disturbing and seems to confound the artist's careful interplay between past and present. But in fact it opens it up, freeing the artist again from the shackles of his own practice to consider a greater range of historical experience. This poem through images in a sense forms a new, broader tableau, leaving *haipai* behind for something both more ethereal and worldly.

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