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## “Beyond the Mountain” is where we all want to go—A SAM Asian Art Museum exhibition

You are here: [Home](#) / [Arts & Entertainment](#) / “Beyond the Mountain” is where we all want to go—A SAM Asian Art Museum exhibition

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Northwest Asian Weekly



Ink Media #4, 2011-2013, Chen Shaoxiong, ink on rice paper.

If there is one word that describes Seattle’s Asian Art Museum, it’s juxtaposition. Old and new. Classical and contemporary. Concepts and eras fuse in a manner that is pleasing every time and thought-provoking. This time, the new special exhibition, “Beyond the Mountain: Contemporary Chinese Artists on the Classical Forms,” running through June 2023, comments on how traditional Chinese art practices and philosophies still show up today—and on how world turmoil has contributed to an increasing desire among all of us to escape “beyond” our troubled world.

In conjunction with students from University of Washington’s “Exhibiting Chinese Art” 2020 seminar, Foster Foundation Curator of Chinese Art, Ping Foong, embraced the chance to utilize SAM Asian’s unique gallery spaces (renovated and reopened in 2020), to invite several contemporary Chinese artists to share their work. The beauty of the museum is that it allows for

interesting juxtapositions of art works against architecture from the 1930s, and the ability to move works already on view into different configurations to satisfy new goals.

Ai Wei Wei's well-known "Colored Vases," for instance, was re-installed into the new exhibition in front of the current flagship piece (some works will be rotated), "To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain" by Zhang Huan.

Foong's students, who provided many of the ideas for "Beyond," and some of the in-gallery text, arranged Ai's vases this time so that they appear to be going up a "hiking trail," thereby mirroring the landscape in Zhang's work. How are these works related? Foong had an answer. Both reference classical Chinese art concepts, such as the preeminence of landscape in Song Dynasty paintings, or the presupposed preciousness of ancient Chinese pots, which Ai questions, or even desecrates. These works, and the exhibition as a whole, change "the nature of what that object is," explained Foong. They question "the way we create a value system"—one of the original themes of the now theme-based rather than location- or time-based museum. In Zhang's work, the performance artist alludes to our human misbelief in our own importance. Nature is always bigger than we are—you cannot make the mountain grow. This concept of human smallness amidst the world's bigness comes into play in the neighboring black and white video by Yang Yongliang, "The Departure." Yang created what is a Chinese landscape, but with a new, disturbing take—it is made from thousands of photos of China's megacities.

Can we "depart" into this work? Is the message that we should "depart" from urbanization of the planet? Or that being surrounded by Nature, or the city, makes us want to "depart?" Yang's works are some that Foong is proud to show in Seattle for the first time. They "force you to do something, which I think is very important for us all to do right now, which is to slow down and stop and think and reflect," she said. (It's worth noting the accompanying work by Yang is titled, "The Return." You do have to come back some time).

Yang's works are deliberately placed as part of bookends on either side of the opening gallery. On the other side, a different video emits what sounds like gunshots versus a noise like waves coming from "The Departure." "Ink Media" by Chen Shaoxiong also uses what we typically think of as Chinese materials, but in a new way. When people think of Chinese art, Foong said, "They think of ink, brush, paper...this artist does use this medium but depicts something 'else.'"

That something else is a collage of images from social media of protests held around the world. Chen took those images and re-created them in ink, then fused them into a video in which it no longer matters where the protest is, who the protesters are, or what they are protesting. We are all one. Languages and faces run together. "Les Misérables" plays in the background, but in Chinese. The images are bold and "raw." The collective effect might be akin to one long scream. Again, we question, what are we doing? And we want to escape, or change.

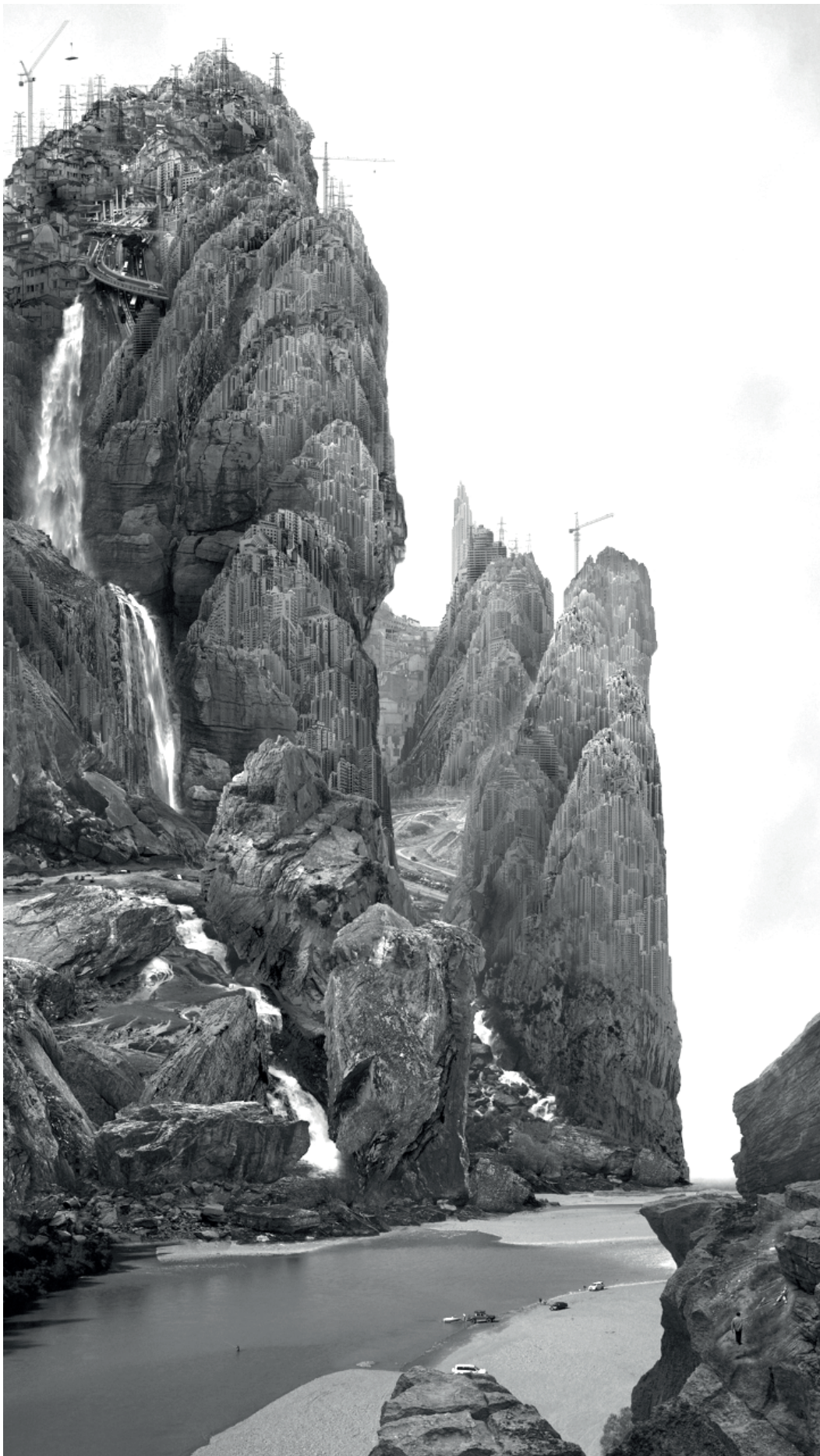
“During the pandemic, we all had to change the way we do things,” Foong pointed out. She had to hurriedly change her in-person seminar to online. In Honk Kong, artist Lam Tung Pang was in lockdown in 2020 and again when he and Foong began to discuss how he might create a site-specific work for SAM Asian.

“We decided we were just going to do this and hope,” said Foong, which seemed to echo a greater truth about the persistence of life during troubled times. The result was an installation by Lam, the crown jewel of which is “The Great Escape.”

someone greater or smaller than you. There will always be another, higher mountain. Always, perhaps, a desire to escape “beyond the mountain.”

*For details and tickets, go to [seattleartmuseum.org/Exhibitions/Details?EventId=85115](https://seattleartmuseum.org/Exhibitions/Details?EventId=85115).*

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The Departure, 2019, Yang Yongliang, screenshot of single-channel 4K video