

## Metal, novembre 2021

*Evie Glen*

Using art as a form of reflection to dissect the world, contemporary landscape artist **Yang Yongliang** engages with the unfamiliarity of his surroundings. Whether it's a new environment, new media or through a new platform, the artist approaches his work by putting himself into unknown situations. After graduating from the China Academy of Art in Shanghai in 2003, art became an outlet for Yongliang to express his thoughts. Using a combination of ancient Chinese aesthetics and a modernised approach, his digital landscapes address the economic, environmental and social issues of urbanisation.

After witnessing the destruction of his hometown, the water town of Jiading outside of Shanghai, the shocking impact became a recurring identifier within the artist's works, translating the pressure and changing environment into visual elements. Yongliang's works often depict dystopian futuristic landscapes where urbanisation collides with the natural world. Creating a black and white narration of China's past, present and future, the artist pulls the viewer into an abyss of the multilayers he creates. Working to bridge a connection between audiences with different backgrounds, his pieces draw on the dismantling of Chinese heritage and tradition in the pursuit of industrialisation. Read on and draw your own interpretations from these digital landscapes.



Art has always played an important role in your life. You were trained in traditional Chinese art at an early age, later graduating from the China Academy of Art in Shanghai in 2003. How did art

provide you with an outlet to express yourself growing up and how have your perspectives as an artist evolved through the years?

I spent three years in graphic and 3D design after college graduation, and then art became an outlet — exactly as you said. Through commercial works I had to share the ideas of the others; in art making I get to express my own thoughts.

I believe that art reflects what an artist thinks. However, good art can never be calculated, it must form with honesty and genuineness. My approach is to put myself into unfamiliar situations, whether it's a new environment, new media or through a new platform. As long as there's something I'm unfamiliar with, I keep myself engaged in the discovery.

Your work offers an alternative perspective on landscape paintings. Creating a black and white dystopia of China's past, present and future, your projects have a very dark and enigmatic feel to them, almost dragging the viewer into an abyss of the multilayers you create. How would you define your own work?

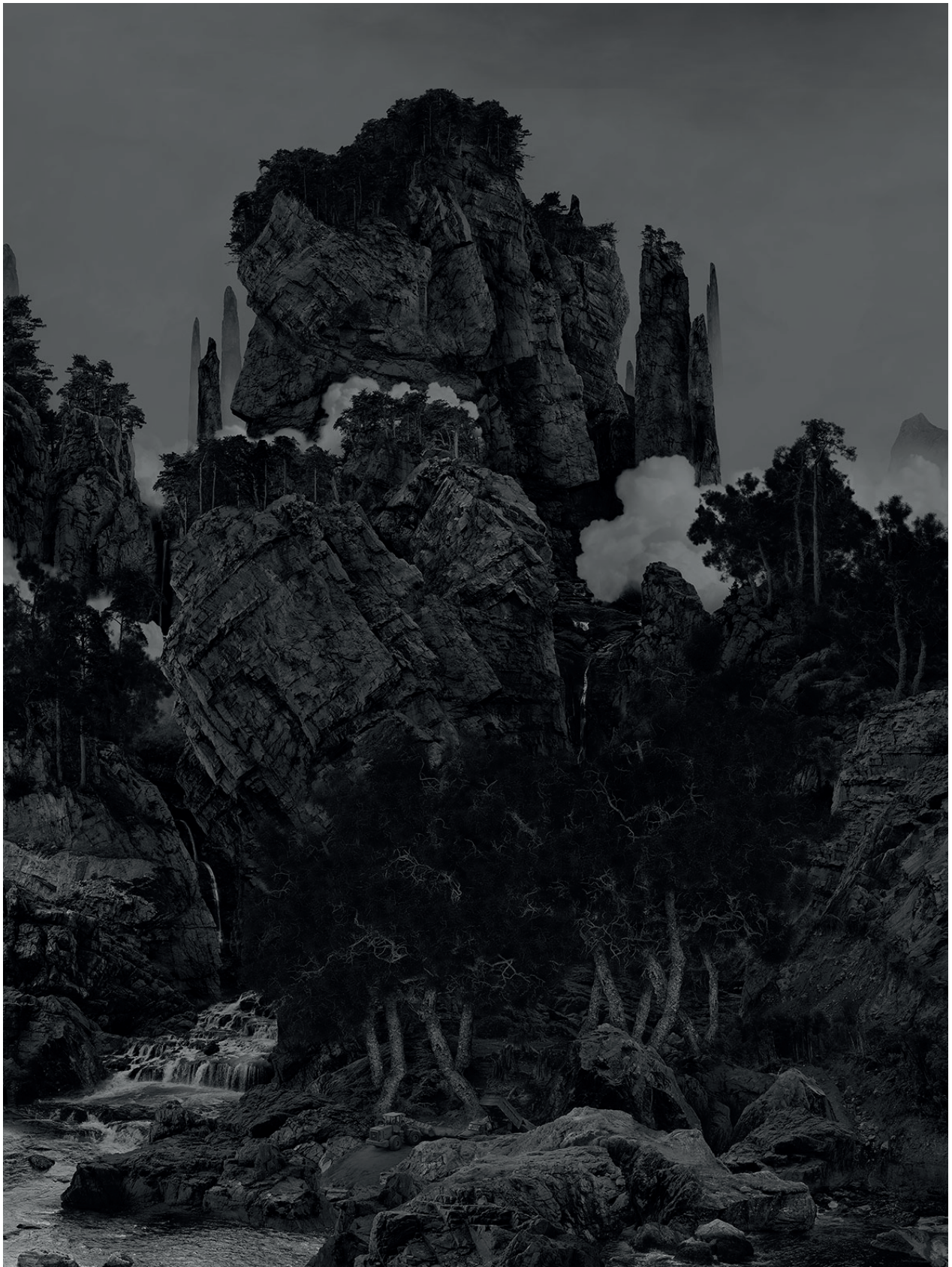
I would rather for my works to define themselves, instead of coming up with a statement of my own — it's not fair to limit a viewer's perspective to my own viewpoint, especially when they depict landscapes — landscapes mean different things to different people who may have different experiences within them. At the meantime, I'm happy to embrace what they have made my audiences feel. If it's the "dark and the enigmatic" feeling that resonates with you, I'm glad that the tones speak to you.

You draw attention to economic, environmental and social issues, addressing the dismantling of Chinese heritage and tradition in the pursuit of urbanisation and industrialisation. Why is it important for you to challenge and question these themes?

I was born and raised in Jiading, a suburban water town approximately an hour away from downtown Shanghai. Jiading was a very special [place] in my childhood memory, for it was once extremely traditional, with small stone bridges connecting the streets above an old canal. In 1999, I left Jiading to go to college in the city; when I came back after graduation, the water town was gone, demolished and erased. Instead it became a tasteless industrialised suburban town just like every elsewhere. The sudden make-over of Jiading really shocked me, I guess I had to express it somewhere in my works.

I grew up with Shanghai's 30-year of urbanisation. Throughout my upbringing, my country has changed from an era of supplies shortage where people live off of food stamps to a new world where the local market has caught up with the global economy. The contradictions and side effects have also undergone and resulted in tremendous pressure. The pressure affects everyone who lives in it, including artists. Artists naturally translate the pressure into visual elements. Artworks naturally appear under these special circumstances.





You create works that merge digital technology and traditional Chinese art forms to challenge ongoing growth. How do these two mediums intersect with each other? How do you find and create this balance in your digital landscapes?

I was trained as a traditional Chinese landscape painting from a very young age, landscape paintings have become a natural language to me. In college, I studied digital art making including

photography and design, among many other [disciplines]; eventually all these languages come back to support what I feel the most comfortable painting — landscapes. So, I guess the hybrid of these two elements collided naturally for me.

You work to preserve ancient Chinese aesthetics through modern techniques. Why is important for you to preserve this aesthetic? How do you incorporate traditional Chinese landscape painting into your modernised works?

The ancient aesthetics have always been a part of my education, and I'm not surprised that it reflects in everything I encounter. It's something that's running in my blood and I can't undo it. Meanwhile I grew up in the 21st century with TV broadcast, Hollywood movies and social media cultures just like everyone else in the world — if I can't be fully satisfied with the aesthetics of brush and ink painting, I assume no one else can. Ancient aesthetics must transcend to some sort of a form to sustain my own modern tastes, and I would continue my experiments to find out how.

Your works depict dystopian futuristic landscapes where urbanisation collides with the natural world. How do you works bridge the gap between artificial and realistic to address the world we live in and the evolution of development?

This is a question that's up to my audience to answer. Again, I'd be happy to hear different answers. Technically, all the elements in my works are made of documentary photography. I simply re-arranged them towards an extreme capacity.

As mentioned previously, you draw attention to environmental and social issues. What other societal issues are you hoping to draw attention to through your work?

In 2018, I moved from Shanghai to New York. My personal life as well as my critical thinking have undergone tremendous changes ever since. Different from China's homogeneous and socialist ideology, the U.S. has to deal with more diverse social issues, taking in consideration race and religions. I now have a keen interest in [America's] complicated society.

You use photography to make sense of the changing environment around you, layering images and creating new worlds. What are you hoping to achieve through your work?

To speak to audiences who grew up with different backgrounds but find a mutual connection.

What's in store for you next? Any projects you're currently working on?

I've been working on a video referring to a Song Dynasty painting called Nine Dragons.









