

Going Outside: Kunlin He and Yi Xin Tong

Betti-Sue Hertz

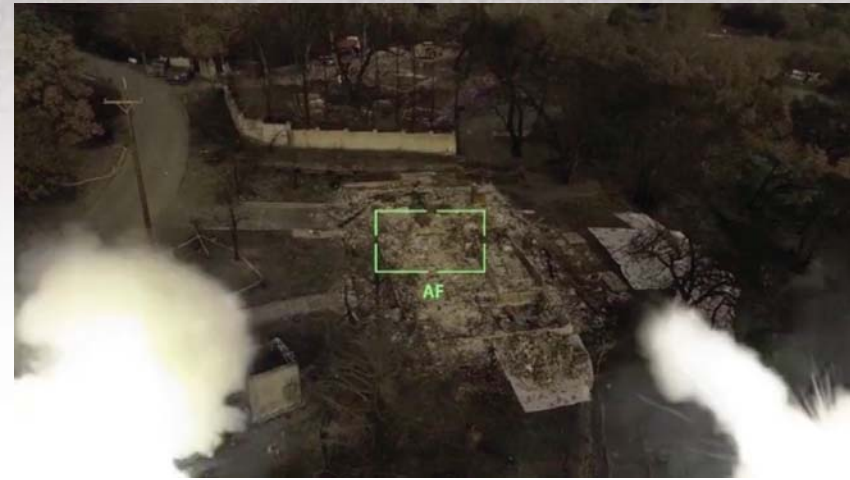
Interest among Chinese artists in the concept of the traditional “literati” or artist-scholar has recently surged. Kunlin He and Yi Xin Tong, two Chinese-born artists who live in the US, share with many young artists inside China and abroad a fascination with the cultural position and practices of the literati painters of the Song, Yuan and Ming Dynasties (960-1644). Regarded as an ethical and artistic elite, the well-educated literati painters pursued Confucian ideals, including those of government service. They eschewed the dazzling virtuosity and flamboyance of the professional “academic” painters of the North employed by the Imperial court in favor of the sensitivity and self-expression that characterizes many of the most revered works of Chinese art history. Landscape painting as its own genre has even earlier origins in Chinese art dating back a millennium to the break up of the Tang Dynasty, when it began to be imbued with metaphoric meanings related to human imperfection. It is this tradition to which the diasporic artists, He and Tong turn, finding particular inspiration in the moral and spiritual resolve symbolized by withdrawal into nature as a political statement of opposition to governing powers that may remind us of the transcendentalism of Henry David Thoreau. Their embrace of this pastoral retreat associated with the past is coupled with a deep desire to participate in their generation’s pulsating, hyper-connected global culture—vernacular forms of social media and digital communication through which ominously accumulating news of ecological disaster and research travel. Although

He and Tong are not formal collaborators, their shared hybrid and collage aesthetics reveal their investigative subjectivities in an intriguing state of flux borne from the realities of living in the USA while nurtured by childhood memories of China.

He is especially influenced by Xiaoxiang¹ literature and painting, which registers feelings about unjust exile by poet-officials and Tong focuses on the concept of Yu Yin, which glorifies the simple and solitary life of the fisherman². While He’s and Tong’s works nod to these ancient traditions of contemplative dissent, their works, fueled by noisy current discourses and alarming empirical realities, also convey the instability of climate, nature and the landscapes of



Kunlin He, *Tales of Hometown Trip*, 2018
Video performance
31'50"



Kunlin He, *Trauma Landscape*, 2018
Video with sound
14'50"

our personal experience. Superficially, their bricolaged art installations represent an embrace of such new technologies as drone imaging, music videos, location-based technologies and internet image mining. But it’s more complicated—each instrumentalizes the techniques of representing landscape to present his own social critique. In their adept hands, they become vehicles for the radical collapsing of fundamental categories such as documentary and collage, hand drawing and mechanized production, the original and the copy, and the real and fictional, in service of shaping new horizons of the possible.

He writes of his intention to “re-think the Eastern avant-garde political aesthetic.”³ In order to connect present and past his installation of Xiaoxiang-inspired paintings and videos, features imagery derived from new imaging technologies. For *California Wildfire 2017*, he adds an animation of video-game-like guns to drone footage of devastation in the

wake of wildfires in semi-rural Marin County, California. For the artist, these decimated scenes are reminiscent of traditional Chinese landscape paintings in their emotional charge and otherworldliness. Contemplating the power of nature’s violence in light of our role in the new, globally-warmed reality underlines this disturbing comparison. More broadly, He is searching for ways to understand cultural difference. Working from images culled from Instagram, his Shan Shui⁴ style paintings from *The Nature of Hobby is Freedom* series depict Chinese tourists set inside a “cut” of the majestic landscape of Yosemite National Park, intended by Congress to provide refreshment from work and city life. Nature surrounds them, in contrast to the Western tendency towards big panoramic views that are psychologically as well as physically distant. This topic may also be a nod of recognition to expanding domestic tourism in China’s national parks and towns, an indicator of the growing urban middle-class’s eagerness for new experiences of nature and cultural history. This phenomenon is represented and even spoofed in *Tales of Hometown Trip*

(2018), a video of a lecture performance⁵ that features a walking tour of the artist’s university town, Wuhan, replete with GPS locators and the descriptions of landmarks, all of which turn out to be fictionalized accounts. He responds to and interprets his American experience through a Chinese lens that speaks to shared conditions in both countries. His recent work explores notions of the traveler, the celebrity and the comic as characters who must negotiate Chinese concepts of masculinity within a Western context.

For Tong, spending time on the shoreline of Brooklyn contrasts sharply with the familiar images of New York’s glittery skyline and cityscape. He writes, “fishing brings me to the remote peripheries of the city where ruins replace buildings and nature’s reclamation is surprisingly ubiquitous.”⁶ For contemporary artists to identify with outsiders is not uncommon and seems to converge with Tong’s conceptual response to his construal of Yu Yin. Yet his reported fishing experiences, represented as trials and tribulations—“It sucked it/It swallowed it /Fish wheel scream/What sound is better than this?/That is a kind of beauty/God!”⁷—speak more to the struggles and delights of fishing than



Yi Xin Tong, *Migration of Eyes – Multispecies Micro Fishing*, 2016
Video with sound
21'10"

to peaceful contemplation. For NYC *Fishing Trip—Who Cares?* (2018)⁸ Tong applies the music video genre to a fishing-themed poem. The slow tempo with a voice over suggesting karaoke on Quaaludes is utilized for the reading of a poem that also appears in goth-derived lettering on top of still images of the shoreline, other fisherman and fish, attesting to the outlay and accumulation of time fishing demands.⁹ For its marginalized community, this hobby activity at the city’s edge, is their expression of escape from the pressures of urban life. By contrast, his *Animalistic Punk* tapestries (2018) possess a more exalted purpose—proposing that experiencing animals in light of their symbolic and talismanic functions holds a key for more positive human interactions with nature. To produce them, he accesses an archive of his own photographs as well as images sourced from library research to make “allegorical collages and crowded representations, in which myriads of human relics, marine animals, and objects construct fictional spaces with a sense of confusion of time.”¹⁰ He then carefully stitches together this imagery from science, history and archeology into what could almost be a contemporary addition to the ancient Chinese encyclopedia of mythical and fantastical animals, *The Classical Book of Mountain and Seas*¹¹.

He and Tong, like so many artists of their generation, seem at home in multiple media, materials and formats, a neo-conceptual approach that takes for granted that in a complex world more is more. In their capable hands, their works, while filled with feelings of displacement and a yearning to go outside and explore, squarely refuse to give up a sense of cultural belonging.

Betti-Sue Hertz is a contemporary art curator whose work focuses on the intersection of



Yi Xin Tong, *Animalistic Punk-Skate*, 2018
Jacquard tapestry, galvanized metal tube, steel eye bolts
63 x 90 1/2 x 3 in. (tapestry size: 63 x 84 in.)

aesthetics and social issues. She has extensive experience in Chinese contemporary Art, having organized major exhibitions in her role as director of visual arts at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco, and as curator of contemporary art at San Diego Museum of Art. Hertz was a curator in residence at HOW Art Museum, Shanghai in 2018.

¹ Exiled poet-officials were often sent to the Xiaoxiang lakes and rivers region. Dong Yuan’s *The Xiao and Xiang Rivers*, Five Dynasties, in the collection of the Palace Museum, Beijing is an early example of this genre.

² Although there were archetypes of the “fisherman” in earlier texts, the Daoist philosopher, Zhuangzi, popularized it in the 4th century. Wu Zhen’s painting, *Fisherman in Reclusion at Dongting*, Yuan Dynasty, in the collection of the National Palace Museum, Taipei is an excellent example of this genre.

³ He’s referring here to the political works of the Chinese avant-garde artists of the 1980s often referred to as the ‘85 New Wave, who were critically engaged with Western artistic and philosophical concepts and experimented with artistic forms. Referenced in the unpublished artist proposal for this exhibition sent to the author via email on June 24, 2018.

⁴ Shan Shui is a direct and expressive style of ink and brush landscape painting that emerged during the Northern and Southern Dynasties.

⁵ The performance took place on March 8, 2018 at the Atlantic Center for the Arts, New Smyrna Beach, Florida.

⁶ Excerpt from the unpublished artist proposal for this exhibition, sent via email to the author on July 5, 2018.

⁷ An excerpt of a translation of Yi Xin Tong’s poem, “The Fisherman’s Word,” published in Chinese in *Pulsasir*: <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/uFX-efTWuARi2DITugKIVg>

⁸ Online at: youtube.com/watch?v=ycd2qORaSeY&t=0s&list=PLQFswdVK8xf-earPWl9ppcNu1V_Augpj5&index=2. Accessed August 1, 2018.

⁹ In a search for reference to Chinese aesthetics from a diasporic position Kunlin He has found the work of Li Zehou to be useful, including this important diasporic philosopher’s discussions of the ancient concept of Music/Joy (乐: Yue/Le) in relationship to daily life, which may be another reference worth pursuing when considering Tong’s music videos.

¹⁰ Excerpt from unpublished artist proposal for this exhibition, sent via email to the author on July 5, 2018.

¹¹ *The Classical Book of Mountains and Seas* or *Shan Hai Jing* is thought to be written by numerous people during the period of the Warring States to the beginning of the Han Dynasty.