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Progress and Time in Gardens, no. 3

Urban space represented in Chen Qinlin's *Garden, no. 3* conveys the counter-productive nature of progress and technology as an ideology embedded within the discourse of development. Chen Qinlin depicts the urban landscape as a space that exists within a temporal history of human progression, which culminates on the grounds of land that waits to be developed, giving the viewer a chance to reflect on notions of civilization, progress and order. The viewer is confronted with a tenuous dynamic that exists amongst the subjects of the image; migrant workers stand in the foreground with gaudily bright peonies in their hands while high rises tower into the sky behind them. The imposing contrast of the high-rise apartments and the poverty of the migrant workers emphasize the social and spiritual deterioration that is married to development.

Chen Qinlin shapes the urban so as to guide the viewer into an attitude of reflection. Initially, the viewer's gaze is directed diagonally upwards, starting scoping the texture of the ground and moving upwards and outwards to absorb the height of the high rises and the vastness of the sky. The position below the workers helps the viewer see the entirety of the picture in an absorptive state, as she is confronted with a realistic frontal representation of the entirety of this urban landscape.

Establishing the identity and purpose of these migrant workers that Chen Qinlin represents is central to understanding their relation to the urban

landscape. As the migrant workers stand with vases of gaudy pink peonies in staggered lines on the undeveloped land, they gaze into the distance with their heads tilting slightly upward. Because of this, our gaze never meets theirs, and our slightly lowered perspective hinders us from knowing the object of their gaze. The workers all stand with wooden slabs across the same side of their back. Chen Qinlin presents these wooden slabs that are used to aid the workers in transporting resources around as an integral tool for their labor, because it is consistently present on all of the workers' bodies. This tool appears to be tied to their physical selves, representing the strength of the link between labor and identity such that their existence is merely a function of larger economic and social needs.

To situate the previously discussed notion of human purpose as a function of the economic market within a context of anonymity, all (insert number of workers) of the migrant workers wear the same type of shoe of uniform color and shape. The uniformity of their shoes emphasizes the workers' anonymity. Visual markers of their individuality are absent in the picture, leaving the viewer with a fragmented if not nonexistent notion of who they are outside the setting of their labor. Qinlin's representation of identity highlights the point that individuals are necessarily and wholly defined by their labor and anonymity in an urban scene. This leaves one with a sense of hopelessness. Because collective identity materializes in a homogenous form, leaving no room for individual identity to take shape.

Chen Qinlin's usage of visual hierarchy alludes to the notion of time's passage. The foreground of this piece presents undeveloped land that is waiting to take shape as an extension of the urban landscape. Standing on top of this ground are the workers, whose tools and presence allude to their labor as the origin of this barren landscape's transformation. A little distance away, behind the workers are five high-rise apartment buildings that are almost completed, with cranes on the peripheral buildings framing their stance. These apartment buildings tower over the workers, their dark windows signaling that they're uninhabited, and furthermore, that the workers will never be able to inhabit these spaces as they are only the workers of development and are barred from reaping the fruit of it. In the far distance behind the apartment buildings are the mountains, standing in the hazy vastness of an untouched realm. These mountains, in their vagueness, embody a notion of the ancient as they are visually situated behind all of the developed landscape and have been present for centuries longer than the concrete buildings before them. The buildings in the middle ground and the mountains in the far background oppose each other in their form as well, as the buildings follow a strict geometric rectangularity, which the mountains do not. Additionally, all of the buildings are detached from one another, which contrasts with the mountains' loose triangular shapes, individuated from other mountains by their ridges. The mountains are also linked to one another, in part because the haze that creates an opaque layer integrates them as one continuous range.

This temporal notion present in the Gardens, no. 3 composition ultimately raises questions concerning ethical and rational aspects of progress. If it is true that the mountains are representative of the past in their untouched quality and their spatial distance from the developing landscape, and the high-rise apartment buildings mark the present state of technological and social advancement, then the forward gaze of the workers allude to a vision of the future. As viewers, we are asked to reflect upon what the future would look like in this trajectory where the urban landscape appears to expand into the future and further into space. In considering the ethics of this type of development, we are also confronted with the people who are responsible for carrying out the tasks of building these structures and dwelling places. First, their anonymity and marked suffering is a product of the urban vision; however their anonymity is not uniquely theirs. The buildings' architecture and uniform windows allude to a type of anonymity of the individual that is similar to the workers' uniformity of appearance. Therefore, this loss of individual identity is proliferated onto the unseen public that is represented as the empty windows, begging the question of the desirability of this new urban landscape.

Chen Qinlin portrays the urban landscape in recognition of the inherent tensions between the workers who construct it and their placelessness and anonymity within the context of larger society. The incongruence between the workers and the consumer society highlights the demoralizing implications of urban development, clearly depicting the failures of development and progress to

create a structure to accommodate people. Therefore, it seems that progress within the context of urban China (but not limited to it) inherently excludes those who are most central to the urban landscape's construction. A critique on progress couldn't have been possible without considering the tensions of the natural and urban landscape, for seeing the natural landscape in the hazy background conjures up nostalgic ideas of what it was like in the past and whether the past was able to accommodate for a type of order that did not displace individuals from their identities and from their homes. A reflective glance of the circumstances encapsulated in Chen Qinlin's Gardens, no. 3 precipitates recognition that the current strategy for development may not be the best one to pursue.