

Disorientation: Confusing the Urban Space

Chen Shaoxiong's "Ink City" explores the transitory nature of the urban landscape with a fast-paced film of ink paintings depicting original photographs of the city spliced into a video narrative. This effect captures the fast-paced life of the city, full of random highways, tall sky scrapers in the distance, and countless faces flowing by in constant drift, each unique to a single moment. As a tourist in a foreign city such intense visual stimuli could be exhilarating and thrilling, but as a local inhabitant watching the city landscape change constantly and instantaneously as it is infinitely expanding—such an experience might be culturally disorienting and spatially confusing. Chen's work gives the viewer a sense of cultural and spatial displacement in expanding urban landscapes by displaying three different media in conjunction to represent the social and architectural environment in a contemporary growing industrial city. His display of photographs of paintings in a video narrative that blurs the line between which of the three media is being expressed is analogous to growing urban spaces in China, which confuse the city dweller of what actually characterizes the city's cultural and physical space. The local individual who calls the city space "home" experiences a loss of physical and cultural attachment due to city vastness and expansion, as well as the infiltration of a deepening global culture.

Certain techniques are used to heighten the sense of displacement for the viewer to feel detached and disoriented in the "Ink City" video narrative. The video installation

begins with a series of photographs of the airport and electrical power structures. Unfamiliar highways and sky scrapers bring the viewer into an unknown sea of individual faces, each unique, but each anonymous. The video narrative continues on to subways, inside apartment complexes, and inside nightclubs. The video ends when the sun goes down and compelling ink paintings of highways at night leave the viewer traveling through this vast city landscape without a destination. This disjointed depiction of the city is heightened by the subtle focus pattern involved when each painting enters the screen. Each painted image comes on the screen slightly out of focus, and then moves into focus just long enough for the viewer to get a glimpse of the face or landscape. After the image is clear for an instant the focus shifts and the image is blurred and then switched to a new image, which follows the same focus pattern. Employing both of these techniques gives the impression of an individual trying to grasp at a memory of a day in the city depicted—in this case, primarily Guangzhou. This technique characterizes the urban landscape as a blurred and indefinable environment.

Such a notion is not surprising when depicting a city like Guangzhou, one of the largest growing economic cities in the world, and one of the most populated in China. Wu Hung discusses how a city space is not only defined by the architectural layout, but also by the people inhabiting such a layout. His book *Remaking Beijing* discusses the structure of Beijing, specifically Tiananmen Square and the social and political implication this has on individuals, including himself, who are regularly familiar with it. Chen Shaoxiong is giving another perspective to this idea by displaying a city growing and changing so rapidly that the individual is left displaced from a familiar environment and group of people on a regular basis. While Wu Hung discusses how a city's structure

affects the masses, Chen's work shows how a city with a structural environment in constant flux affects the ever-growing culturally amorphous inhabitants.

The second medium employed for heightened visual experience is the use of traditional ink painting. The vast series of ink paintings is modeled after actual photographs of various scenes throughout the city of Guangzhou. Palm trees dot some of the cityscape depictions, while other scenes are void of any plant life whatsoever. Great care is put into individual facial expressions and characteristics in portrait shots, but it is difficult to get a full grasp of each face due to the fast-paced and blurred film techniques. However, this does not inhibit the viewer from experiencing the expressiveness of the brush strokes (figures 1 and 2). The skilled painting brings the multitude of individual faces alive. The expressiveness also animates the numerous depictions of urban landscapes. The use of this style to depict buildings instead of mountains provides an extra commentary on the man-made environment that now envelops billions of daily lives.

The subjects of the paintings are not the only important aspect to the whole visual effect of the piece. The use of traditional black ink to depict photographs gives a somber and murky feel to the video, which relates to the muddy idea of cultural identity within Guangzhou. Though the city might have more color in reality, ultimately in memory the images fade to shades of gray. Even the moments of yesterday are already lost to a vast foggy expanse that is the gigantic economically growing city, in this case Guangzhou. Every present moment is muddled into the last and the city does not act as a stagnant, structural force. Constant construction projects speckle the street corners, power lines scratch the skies, swimming pools nestle between a few lucky complexes, the bus

schedule continues, was it Guangzhou or Shanghai? The city keeps moving. Specifically, the ink painting style acts as a second layer to the three media compilation of “Ink City.” It becomes another method of displacement for the viewer, who is further removed from the original moments depicted.

It is important to highlight that each painted image was created after an actual photograph. This enhances the actual flux of Chen’s depiction of an expanding urban environment. Each image has a snapshot-like quality, as if the taker wished to preserve the characteristics of his environment by creating stills of it. In an act of preservation, the stills act as the first layer of the piece, the layer that is the most direct connection to the flux of the city landscape and completes the triad of media used in this video installation. Though the ink painting style changes the nature of a still photograph, the composition of each image still resonates with a snapshot by a camera. The quick flash of each painted scene in the video narrative accentuates the snapshot feel, especially when images of the same highway, nightclub, or apartment are shown in succession. The effect is an impression that the images were taken within seconds of one another. There are gaps between each painted still, and the events between each are lost, but the images available reveal an attempt to capture motion in an instant.

When viewed in conjunction, the photographs, ink painting, and video element contribute to a complete picture of a vast economically important city consistently expanding and rapidly changing. The effects of so much growth dislocate individuals from a firm understanding of cultural history and tradition into a melting pot of information and commercialism. The three media are confused as the growing city is further confused of its identity, culturally and spatially. Landscapes and people change

and flow by at such rapid rates that they become indistinguishable in memory, and the city experience becomes amorphous and confused. This has largely to do with the artist as a local individual in Guangzhou, one of the largest economically growing cities in China. Chen Shaoxiong's "Ink City" is a visual reaction to the shapelessness of such a large city and the anonymity of its inhabitants. The home city becomes foreign to the local dweller, and while the motion can be stimulating, it can also wear thin a unified form of cultural identity.