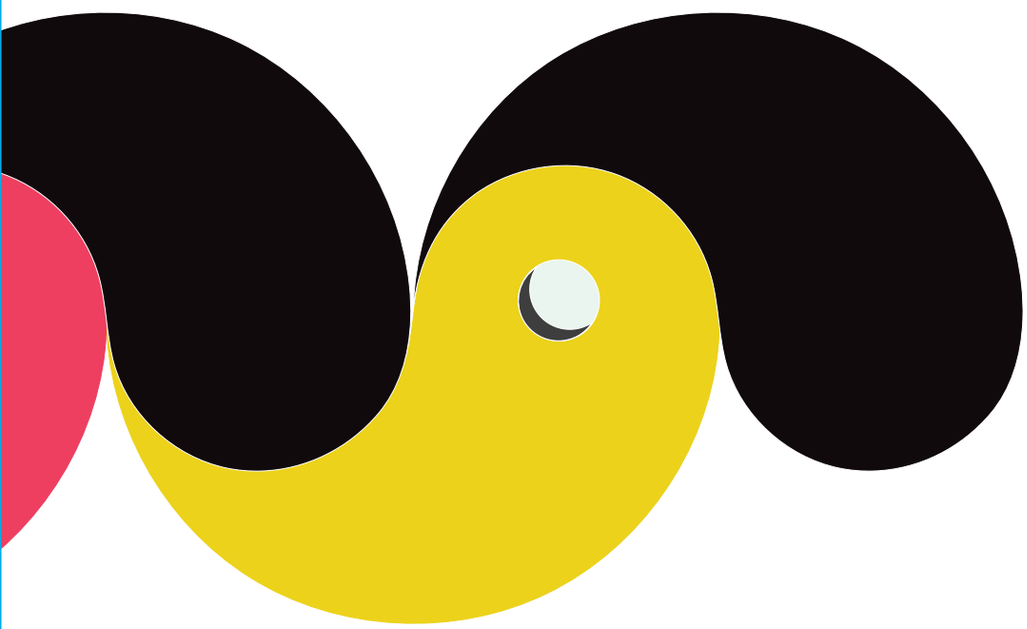
ECOART CHINA

境善境美



ECOART CHINA

境 善 境 美

University of Alberta

Department of Art & Design

How does art make the world 

PREFACE

THE FIVE PHASES 五行

Ancient Chinese correlative cosmology teaches that the movement of the universe follows the ceaseless rhythm and transformation of the five elemental phases and *yin* and *yang* energies. Water, wood, fire, metal, and earth merge and meld into each other through fluid patterns that are both generative and damaging.

Art has a place within this ecology. It is inside it, rather than out. Not merely a reflection, art is part of the cycle of transformation. But how *does* art make the world? It is our hope that the works of art in this exhibition—each connected with a particular elemental phase—will move you, make you think, touch your memory and imagination, and, in doing so, encourage you to gain fresh perspectives on ecological crises across the planet and possibilities for environmental justice.

五行与生态危机

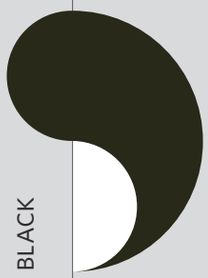
The Five Phases and Ecological Crises

***WATER* 水**

River Pollution

***WOOD* 木**

Deforestation



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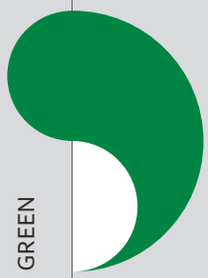


GREEN

水 木

***FIRE* 火**

Air Pollution
& Burning Fossil Fuels

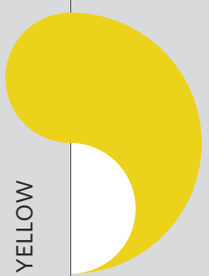
***EARTH* 土**

Garbage Mountains

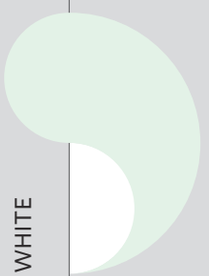
***METAL* 金**

Mining

RED



YELLOW



WHITE

火 土 金

PART I

ESSAYS

ecoArt China

Lisa Claypool

How does art make the world? *ecoArt China* poses this question of arts that depict the landscape of twenty-first-century China. Artworks by a brush-and-ink painter, a cut paper artist, photographers, and a video artist capture and convey struggles with the capitalist-scientific rationalities that have prefigured the end of the world. They also embody the emotions and imagination lodged in and about the natural environment that generate a hopeful sense of possibility for renewal.

Our curatorial project probes the ways in which art elicits perceptual reverie over fire, water, metal, earth, wood. Those same "five elements" (*wuxing* 五行) of the landscape in imperial-era correlative thinking would have been better understood as the "five phases" because of the ways that they transfigure and meld into each other. One elemental phase shapes and gives rise to the next. A strange equilibrium is achieved because the opposite is true as well: one phase shapes and damages the next. The five phases are the fluid lines upon which this exhibition is curated.

Each elemental phase is associated a specific ecological crisis: air pollution and the burning of fossil fuels (fire); river pollution (water); deforestation (wood); garbage mountains (earth); mining (metal). Grasping the historical and ecological complexity of these crises in China is critical. But equally importantly, our curatorial strategy seeks to awake sensitivity towards constant environmental change across the globe—to return to a sense of the undifferentiated in today's highly differentiated world, a world partitioned by boundaries, categories, classifications. It further maintains an openness to how the ongoing transfiguration of the five phases moves us emotionally, thoughtfully, imaginatively, and, in doing so, encourages us to gain new perspectives and to commit to seeing

the planet and possibilities for environmental justice in a new light. In both senses of movement and change, art is part of a global ecology itself.

But if art is embedded in the ecological system yet at the same time allows us to see it in a fresh new way—if it is of the system and also about it—how might that work, exactly? For instance, can it allow us to messily grasp the hyperobject described by Timothy Morton as something so huge and toxically sublime that it is at the edges of human apprehension? A hyperobject would be a continent of plastic floating in the ocean, radioactive waste, an oil spill (Morton 2007). Or does it more effectively give us nuanced perspectives on the beauty of the local—the scales on a butterfly's wings, the smooth rocks at the bottom of a clear stream, cherry trees blossoming a few short days in spring—on which other ecocritics such as Wendell Berry like to dwell (Bilbro 2015)? Another way to put the question, then, might be, how does art locate us in the world?

Still, the two questions about art making the world and art locating us in the world are not entirely congruent. There is a precision to "location," an anchoring in space and time, that constrains the fluidity and freedom to ways of seeing and engaging with art that are more diffuse and intangible, more like the rhythm of the five phases themselves. To think about art making the world is to muse on a kind of experience of it that can immediately call up feelings, but also can be like a daydream, a mode of living in the head that nonetheless has deep connections to real things in the world.

That experience of being moved by an artwork and of entering into a state of reverie inspired by an artwork is deeply intimate. Though here again things get sticky, because one person's experience of art might not be everyone's, and typically is not, and a sense of an expanded community where people share a visual experience too would seem to be important to the notion of art making the world. For instance, if we can't agree on what it is we are looking at, how can there be environmental justice?

So how *does* art make the world?

The question becomes more complex the longer one thinks on it. It perhaps comes as no surprise, then, that when this question was put to each of the six artists whose work is featured in *ecoArt China*, they responded with sometimes widely differing answers. During the last months of 2020 they shared their thoughts in interviews by phone, Zoom, emails, and Weixin. We take up their reflections by cycling through the exhibition structure of the five phases, following the generative rather than the destructive path. We begin with water.

Water is supported by metal.

Michael Cherney is a Beijing-based photographer who prints his film images as if he were painting ink on handscrolls. In 2012 he travelled the Yangtze River along the pathway of an anonymous artist of the thirteenth century, moving across time and space and into the river itself. "It's nice that you used the term 'make the world,'" he responded, "because it is a phrase that appears in a quote by Rebecca Solnit that was very influential to my personal artistic direction:

> In some way, making was intended to override the givens of nature, to create a world; that world has itself become a given whose terms are more limited in their scope for imagination and act. The world is so thoroughly made it calls for no more making, but for breaching its walls and tracing its processes to their origins. "Taking apart" has become the primary metaphor and "backward" the most significant direction: the creative act becomes an unraveling, recouping the old rather than augmenting the new. (2003, 164)

"When the early, great Chinese painting masterpieces were created," he continued, "it feels as if Nature and 'the wild' were still dominant forces surrounding pockets of 'civilization,' whereas reality now is the opposite of that, and one must struggle to find any place on the planet that has not been influenced/altered by mankind. I feel this to be why cropping, detail, and grain have become the defining characteristics of my art.

The recent flourishing of scholarship on environmental history seems to have converged with my own journey of understanding how 'environment' and 'landscape' are intertwined. Professor Zhang Ling at Boston College has written that

> The world is neither a world of humans, nor a world centering on and serving humans; history is not about or for humans alone; hence, studying history with a sole concern for human affairs is not only limited and partial, but it is also theoretically and empirically subject to deconstruction and re-evaluation once it is placed back into the flattened and broadened human-non-human world. (2018, 40)

A succinct way of expressing this idea in the visual terms of classical landscape painting could be "山水画 … 没人" [in paintings of mountains and waters … there are no human figures]: humanity's miniscule role in relation to the grand landscape in which it dwells."

Cherney then pivots from the agency of the land to the human presence in the world—to questions of location. "The connection to an evolving, grander landscape, the connection to evolving historical maps, and the connection to a long evolving art tradition have all combined to give me (as an artist) a sense of location in time and space. There is awe when confronting such history. Great joy and gratitude can be found in those moments of connection when clicking the shutter out in the field. Looking beyond the scale of a single artist or lifetime, the grander landscape helps in, as Peter Sturman writes, 'replacing subjectivity away from selfhood to accord with the demands of kinship and community… individual voices speak collectively, and with a sense of mission'" (2014, 118).

Water supports wood.

The ink painter and light artist Zheng Chongbin dwells on mosses, tree bark, and roots in his paintings. Though to call them paintings does not recognize the way they close the distance between light art and the materiality of paper, ink, acrylic. He works in and between both mediums. Philosopher François Jullien could have been writing about Zheng's work when he observes that historically, ink painters in China "do not paint things to show them better, and, by displaying them before our eyes, to bring forth their presence. Rather, they paint them between 'there is' and 'there is not,' present-absent, half-light, half-dark, at once light-at once dark" (2009, 4). Zheng pushes at the agency of the ink in his work. He tests its darkness and light. He plays with it.

"At the level of the individual, art gives a sense of purpose," Zheng observed. "It is a remedy for a volatile time like this, a time of frustration and violence. It is essential to nurturing a sense of community, and to engaging with the mind, and influencing it, changing it, though maybe not directly. It's not an immediate cause-and-effect change. Art works slower. It influences the mind at a deeper level, spiritually." For Zheng, art quietly shifts perception of the world by healing rifts and closing gaps. Part of that healing is reconnecting the individual to the community, though it's not a simple, fast, or easy process. Those two things—seeing the world and a sense of a greater self—cannot be prised apart. He adds, "Perception of the world (*shijie guan* 世界观) has dimensional layers to it. It's about what people take in, how they're connecting."

Wood supports fire.

Maskbook is an online international art-action project conceived by the photographer and intermedia artist

Wen Fang and realized with the support of the non-profit Art of Change 21. As the name of the non-profit indicates, ground zero for Wen Fang is change. For her, making art is activism. *Maskbook* captures that. Participants from around the world post photos of themselves wearing their own handmade masks-turned-art to a site dedicated to raising awareness of "the link between health, air pollution, and climate change" (Maskbook 2015). How so? Masks crafted from organic materials like kale, sea stones, and daisies, as well as synthetics like plastic water bottles, Big Pharma vials, and lightbulbs, work in two ways—first, to summon responses to the gritty pollutants released into the air through the burning of fossil fuels, and second, by way of designs referencing uneven distribution of wealth, gender inequalities, colonialism, racism, and other social, economic, and political crises, to bring attention to the connections between social and environmental justice.

There is a vibrancy and positive force about Wen Fang as a person that is fully embodied in her art projects, which almost always are collaborative and in diverse mediums (photographs, land art, bronze and sound). Recently, for example, an art-action project "*To Paint a Family*" (*Hua yige jia* 画一个家 , 2020) brought Wen and a group of professional artist-friends to the small village of Cuiyang, Tianshui, Gansu Province, where they lived and worked and performed side-by-side with the villagers. Mural paintings of a pink elephant curving over a doorway and a sleek donkey on the side of a village wall convey joy.

Faith in our ability to act for each other and the planet is deeply linked to Wen Fang's sense of the power of art to make the world. "Yes, I believe that art does have the ability to transform the world," she responded, "but before it attempts to transform the world and other people, art first ought to be a tool to transform the self. What's more, I believe not only that art can make the world, but that every single ordinary person's every single way of thinking, every single word, and every single action—all of it can make the world."
是的，我相信艺术是有改变世界的能力的，但是在试图改变世界和他人之前，艺术首先应该成为改变自己的工具。而且我认为不仅艺术可以创造世界，而且每一个普通人的每一个想法，每一句话和每一行为都在创造着世界 .

Fire supports earth.

Yao Lu's photomontages reveal garbage as the new natural landscape. Minerally green hills beyond rivers turn out to be mountains of trash covered by green plastic nets. About his own work, he says,

> 我的作品是运用传统中国绘画的形式表现当代中国的面貌，中国在不断的发展着，在不断的建设过程中有许多东

Wen Fang 文芳 and a group of professional artist-friends. ***To Paint a Family*** (***Hua yige jia* 画一个家**), 2020.

西产生同时也有许多东西消失了，那些“防尘布”覆盖的土堆和垃圾是一个普遍的现象 … 我们必须保护环境 …

My artworks employ the formats of traditional Chinese painting to express the face of contemporary China. China is a state of unceasing development, and in the process of unceasing construction many things are being produced and, at the same time, many things are vanishing. Those [plastic net] “dust cloths” that cover piles of earth and garbage [created by construction projects] are a universal materialization [of this dynamic]. (Qu, 2020, 19).

How do Yao Lu’s images support his commitment, in his own words, that “we must protect the environment.” His reflections on photography as a medium are revealing on this count:

摄影可以理解为非常传统的，它可以记录很多以前的历史，让人们回到了以前的某一个时代；摄影也是非常当代的，它可以非常清晰的把见到的东西重新组合再编辑整理，让人们在作品前产生时间和空间的错觉，可以看到既真实又不真实的影像。

Photography can be understood in an extremely traditional way as recording many histories; it lets people return to earlier times. Photography also is very much of the contemporary moment; it can radically re-assemble the things that we actually see into new compositions and forms, and through editing and sorting, it lets people before the artworks enter into illusions of time and space; people can see images of things that are truly real and things that are not at the same time. (Qu 2020, 19).

It is that in-between space—a space where history meets illusion, where facts become halfway fugitive—that encourages contemplation. When entering into that shadowy space, a more thoughtful way of seeing the earth beneath our feet is possible. Yao writes,

我觉得艺术的影响在今天越来越大，它直接影响的是我们的内心世界，因为随着我们当今的世界的物质化越来越扩大，精神上出现了大量的缺失，这是一个普遍现象，曾经在上个世纪有人提出过“艺术救国”的口号，虽然不是很现实，但是说明一点：艺术在所有人们精神追求的范畴里应该是最重要的，它像流水、像空气，润物细无声，无时无刻的渗透到我们的生活的每一个细节，因此不可否认的是艺术在不断的以各种形式让人们去接受和感知。

I feel that art’s influence today is increasing. What it directly influences is our inner worlds—and since

> the materialism of the world right now is hugely expanding, within those inner worlds there has been an enormous loss. This is a common enough phenomenon. In an earlier generation there were people who promoted the slogan "art saves the nation" and although that's not particularly realistic, it still speaks to the point: it is undeniable that art unceasingly, in all of its forms, allows people to perceive and experience [the world].

Taking a prompt from Morton, he explains that art nonetheless "is like running water, like air, lubricating everything in the most minute way, noiselessly and timelessly permeating every aspect of our lives. And because of this, what has to be admitted is that art unceasingly, in all of its forms, is something that people accept and perceive."

Earth supports metal.

The eyes of miners stare out from behind the masks of coal dust and sediment caked onto their faces. Their images slowly shift to mined craters in the earth. Zhao Liang created the *Black Face White Face* three-channel video installation during the filming of a documentary about mining in Inner Mongolia. When asked about the power of art to act ecocritcially, he responds, "This is a question about why I make work." He pauses to draw something on a piece of paper, which turns out to be his surname: Zhao 赵 . The simplified character has two parts: a radical that means "to walk" 走 (in classical Chinese it often means "to flee") and an X, like the mark on an exam paper to denote an error. "I've taken the wrong direction!" he laughs. "But actually, it's the world that's on the wrong road, not me." Zhao explains,

> 如果我们企图用艺术作品矫正，提醒世人，这也是我认为文艺作品最多能达到的一个理想状态。它甚至像一个羽毛掉进水里一样，在社会里面边，他没有作用，没有激起任何浪花。那怕激起一丝浪花也没有用，因为那个河太大了。想一个高速火车一直往那边奔，你几个人也阻挡不了。对我来说，艺术作品的无力感是这样的。

> If we intend to use artworks as a way to rectify and remind people, this is the most idealistic attitude that we can take about what art is able to do. Art is like a feather that has fallen into the water: inside society it has no function; it doesn't have any sort of ripple effect in arousing people. And even if it causes a few ripples, it's no use—because that river is too big. Think of a high-speed train always running in one direction: a few people can't stop it. For me, this explains the sense of the powerlessness about works of art.

It is hard to question Zhao's dark pessimism. The costs of society's reluctance and failures to change itself—to recognize the role that art might possibly play in shifting perspectives if only the ripple effect were allowed to expand, for instance—are terrible, and very much in evidence in the crises across the planet. He adds,

> [但是] 我们明明知道，我们前面就是死路，但是我们也无力改变。我们只能看着它这样下去。这就是从事此类文艺的人的悲哀和绝望。我觉得对于我来说这是很绝望的事情。你看着它，但是你很无力，它就这样，你也没办法。这是我自己的一个态度，所以我想 "你能通过伟大的作品怎样影响人类世界 ," 这都是特别罔顾事实的。我认为文艺作品改变不了世界。真正能改变世界的，可能只有这些强人，这些政治家，他们去改变这些东西。

> We clearly know that the path before us is a death road, but we have no power to change it. We can only watch it unfold. This is the sorrow and hopelessness of artists engaged with these facts. I feel that, for me, this is a completely hopeless situation. You observe it, but you have no power; this is just the way it is, there's nothing you can do about it. This is my own attitude, so I think any statement that "great art can impact the world in such and such a way" is just ignoring reality. I don't think art can change the world. To truly change the world, probably only a few particularly powerful people, government officials, only they can transform these things.

And yet, Zhao continues to make work that asks us to stay with the trouble.

Imagination strains after the dandelion the cut paper artist Bovey Lee has carved from a paper surface. Deep within the tangle of its roots are tiny high-rises and a construction crane lifting a steel beam, the processed products of mining.

"Since the pandemic," she writes, "I have discovered a newfound interest in political philosophy and taken several online courses. While art is not the focus of these courses, Plato and Aristotle, the two greats, did deliberate on the role of art in society. Their views as we know are wildly opposing. Plato believed immoral art should be banished so as not to corrupt young minds, while Aristotle thought tragedy cathartic, inspiring, and exciting 'pity and fear'.

Regardless of their opposing views, my takeaway is that they both saw in art an immense power that affects people, society, culture, behaviours, emotions, and the human spirit."

That immense power is one that, to Lee's mind, "communicates directly without processing through reason and therefore reaches deep into one's soul . . . There is nothing like art that has such immediate impact on the human mind." To her, an individual's experience of being open and vulnerable to the power of art *is* social and cultural. "If we want to understand the world or a culture, look at the art that's being created. To get us to a better place with more mutual respect and tolerance, I wish to see that we become more interested and curious about each other's artistic creations."

Synthetic Elements and the Aesthesis of the Anthropocene

Amanda Boetzkes and Isabel Brandt

ecoArt China brings us straight into the aesthetic and ecological knot that defines the visuality of the Anthropocene. Industrial processes have conditioned the planet to such an extent that the very cornerstones of nature—the five phases of water, wood, fire, earth, and metal—can no longer be said to be elemental. Rather, synthetic materials, toxic substances, and human pollutions have displaced them. To say that the elements have been displaced, however, is to suggest something of the aesthetic paradigm at play in contemporary Chinese art. The world may not at first appear to be so changed; the Anthropocene is not so readily identifiable. This is why scientists debate its primary and secondary marker horizons through the analysis of sediments in the geological stratosphere. Yet, as the artists of *ecoArt China* show us through their works, while our planetary home has transformed beyond recognition, the appearances of the Anthropocene can be deceiving. Natural beauty has been unsettled and we cannot but look at it differently. But look we must; *ecoArt China* leads us to the realization that synthetic elements travel through natural environments aesthetically and not just geologically. The artworks train our eyes to see this tense oscillation between natural life and industrial intervention. By reflecting on this aesthetic movement—the *aesthesis* of the Anthropocene—we see a changed condition in which water has been poisoned, wood is carbon fuel, fire burns through resources making the air heavy with contamination, mountains of waste have become a landscape, while metal mining is among the most toxic and exploitative resource industries. The Anthropocene is an invasive topology that dislocates nature. While it is undoubtedly the economy of resource extraction that drives the appetite for the elements, the aesthesis of the Anthropocene suggests that the economy moves autonomously, tearing through the earth along vectors of geochemical reaction. As the elements become synthetic, they show that the very terms of the resource industry

have overtaken the resources themselves. Their flows and textures have been simulated and, with this change, our access to life itself has vanished. We are left unanchored in a world of appearances, our origin in the elements seemingly forgotten.

Yet it is this quest for an origin in the elements that motivates Michael Cherney's play on the famous Song dynasty scroll *Ten Thousand Li up the Yangtze River*. Following the path charted by its forty-two views, Cherney recreates the scroll by photographing contemporary views of the Yangtze. Titled *Ten Thousand Li of the Yangtze River*, Cherney's project involved tracking the river to its source in the Min River in Sichuan Province, as charted by the older scroll. But he also discovered that the river has more far-reaching sources that could be tracked to the Tuotuo, Tongtian, and Jinsha Rivers in neighbouring Qinghai Province. The photographic project thus remaps the Yangtze by tracking it back to its bifurcation at the confluence between the two provinces, and then following the waterways that feed it.

But inasmuch as Cherney offers an alternative perspective of the Yangtze, challenging its mythic totality with the complexity of the waterways that lead into it, his version of the ten thousand *li* capture the ecological challenges that are bearing down on the ideal views of it that can be traced back to the Song dynasty. Where the latter scroll shows bucolic scenes where the river is cradled by mountains, lush forest, and fertile fields, Cherney shows how the river flows through industrial landscapes: riverbanks have become urban ports teeming with boats used to import and export goods. A grey haze permeates the scenes. Instead of the gentle silhouettes of mountains and plants, the horizon line has been eclipsed by the sharp horizontal lines of a multitude of freight liners. As Cherney captures the river coursing through rocky canyons, the overlap of water and rock calls to mind the toxic runoff from mining, factories, and refineries that have proliferated along the Yangtze. While the Song dynasty scroll revelled in the river's natural abundance, today it abounds with silent pollution. Cherney's series highlights the struggle between tradition and modernity, the mighty Yangtze binds China's present to its past, yet it has permanently changed though the causes remain unseen. The river is no longer just a river; it has become a superhighway of industrial exchange not merely of good but of the element of water itself. The Yangtze is an industrial wasteway.

In a similar vein, Zheng Chongbin's practice features the element of wood and the way its textures offer a fractal view of forests, trees, and the root systems that connect them like the ventricles, veins, and arteries of an earthly respiratory system. But Zheng's installations show how wood has been drained of life. Drawing from the Light and Space movement

on the American West Coast and traditional Chinese ink painting, Chongbin creates wall-sized prints of his paintings. But his landscapes disclose a sobering reality. Like an X-ray image, Chongbin's landscapes show a negative image of the forest. Against the light that shines through the wall hanging, the bones of the forest—its tree trunks, spreading branches, and roots—show wood in its ruined form. Deforestation, whether due to clear-cutting or wild fires, is implicit in these scenes of denuded trees. The installation situates the viewer in a microcosm, standing at the very base of a towering treeline. But from here, the microscopic views of wood reveal a scorched terrain. Watermarks look like blights, clouds of smog that hang amid thinned trunks. Rather than showcasing the technical foundations of ink painting, Zheng Chongbin illuminates a forest shrouded by an invisible condition that has leached the forest of life and growth.

A global form of fire underlies the corruption of all five phases, for it is fire, and its deployment in the burning of fossil fuels, that drives the global economy into the global ecology of climate change. As the atmosphere heats up, it leads to desertification, rising sea levels, extinctions, and more. This unmitigated burn of carbon resources is the fulcrum of the aesthesis of the Anthropocene. Carbon burning now mediates how we see one another, both as living organisms and as fellow social beings. The air is now replete with chemical microparticles, industrial miasma, and flu viruses and yet we all draw breath and confront one another in this heated ethos. Wen Fang's *Maskbook* demonstrates how any defence of our bodies against the carbon regime requires that we intercede on our most recognizable human features: our faces. The work is participatory, comprised of tens of thousands of portraits of people with masked faces from around the world. Participants were invited to create and photograph their own works or participate in *Maskbook* workshops across the globe. Each mask was crafted from recycled materials, which inform the character of the masks and denote something about the place and culture of the wearer. But it is precisely from these recycled materials that we see the anxious global condition. While the portraits show smiling eyes, the masks seem to overwrite the expressivity of the face. *Maskbook* shows how all social relations are mediated by the accumulation of industrial pollutions. More subtly, the defence against pollution—the mask itself—appears as both a symptom of the toxic global condition and the protection against it. The appearance of repurposed garbage bound to the face is off-putting, to say the least. Yet *Maskbook* works to combat the anxiety and helplessness that many people feel when confronted with environmental crises by giving participants a vehicle by which to offer an individuated expression at the very moment when people are being forced to cover themselves due to the pressure

of global health security measures. The participatory action also creates an opportunity for different cultures and communities to engage in a dialogue on climate change and air pollution. The images of the masks highlight the creativity that exists within these communities and the range of responses to environmental crises. After all, masks seek to preserve both wearers and those who surround them.

If garbage has attached itself to the faces we see and mediates the terms of our social expressivity, so also has it burrowed into the land, emptying it out and replacing the very element of earth. Yao Lu's digital chromogenic photographs of mountains of trash make this predicament explicit. Yet he captures them in traditional style of the Song dynasty landscape. Manipulating images of garbage mounds held together with green netting, he repositions the heaps of garbage as pine forest mountains, cliffs, and rolling hills. He therefore reframes our perception and understanding of waste as material that can be eliminated from the environment and shows it to be an integral component of the earth itself.

The landscapes look dreamy and ethereal at first glance, the mounds embraced in a soft green ambience that resonates with the iconic pine trees. But upon closer inspection, the images disclose a haunting displacement. The viewer confronts the reality that the ground of existence, the earth itself, has been emptied out and replaced with a manufactured terra firma. We walk with our own garbage underfoot. Yao therefore brings industrial waste out of invisibility and into view as a primary component of the land. The oscillation between earth and garbage is difficult to reconcile. The tin figures in the foreground communicate the colossal scope of the problem of global waste accumulation. Like Cherney's landscapes, the clouds and atmosphere no longer yield a sense of mystery but instead interrupt the ecology of mountains, trees, and water with a tense concern for the suffocating smell of landfill as well as the dust and particulate debris that surely issues from these entities. One comes to an abrupt realization of the proximity of these mountains of trash to the river and trees. Leachate must surely be contaminating the surrounding soil and groundwater. If the earth itself has been replaced by garbage, then what source can living beings draw from?

Nevertheless, as though we are still in denial that the earth's resources are limited, extraction industries have driven the global perspective deeper into the ground in the pursuit of metals, oil, and rare earth minerals. Among these coveted resources, metal brushes so closely with the economy that it became a standard of value (the gold standard) over the course of the Industrial Revolution until the mid-

twentieth century, after which it was replaced by finance capital and energy resources such as oil. Yet the history of metal mining still holds sway in the global economy, serving as a stable preserver of implicit value while the stock market rises and falls. The substructure of metal mining, the exploitation of racialized labour and slavery, has become increasingly more visible and contentious. Kathryn Yusoff makes the relationship between mining, slavery, and the Anthropocene explicit in her recent book A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None (2019). To speak of the Anthropocene in its topological movement, one which displaces the elements and renders the five phases as synthetic forms, is also to acknowledge that while the Anthropocene is a totalizing phenomenon, it comes into existence in the processes of drawing energy from the exertion, and emiseration of a multitude of particular lives.

These lives, these people, their suffering, their faces underlie the pursuit of metal. Such is the reflection at stake in Zhao Liang's three-channel video installation, *Black Face White Face*. While mining penetrates the earth, empties it out, and drives human equipment ever deeper, the miners themselves are touched and enfolded by the materials they uncover. On the left, one miner is covered in dark coal ash; on the right, one is covered in white limestone dust. In the middle is a migrant worker seen only from the back of his head, his hair blowing in the wind. The footage comes from a longer documentary, but here Zhao asks viewers to simply look at their faces, to see their skin covered in mining residues. They are not merely marked by their labour; they are enveloped by it. They have breathed it in and it enfolds their appearance. The artwork includes a statement from them: "I am gazing at you, you cannot ignore my existence." While the dangerous working conditions of mining are understood in the abstract—it is no secret that mining causes chronic illness and cancers—Zhao suspends the fatalism of the industry to cultivate an encounter between viewers and these individual miners. The miners look evenly at the camera and allow themselves to be seen, offering a chance to be acknowledged. We hold their faces in view and experience their specific struggles, which register against the schemas of injustice that put them on one side of the chain of labour and us on the other. Zhao therefore invites our eyes to entangle with theirs, across the dust that mediates their faces.

ecoArt China takes us from the intimate encounter with the substructure of mining to the macrocosmic view of extraction in its most destructive forms: carbon emissions and nuclear power. Bovey Lee's elaborate paper cut-out works visualize the tension between scenes of technological development and the desire for nature. Picturing lively cities, power

lines, factories, and skyscrapers, her intricate landscapes capture the intermingling of the industrial complex with natural forms: the outgrowth of a metropolis from a bonsai tree or a congested multilane highway peeking through from behind a screen of foliage. But despite the serene beauty of the natural components, this intermingling is unsettling. As nature gives way to the telling forms of the industrial cities, the energies animating the image spring from a human origin. One image summarizes this state of affairs: a powerplant billows a panoply of clouds, lightning, parachutes, jellyfish, airplanes, and a rocket. All are bound together in a holey butterfly net from which several butterflies have escaped. Nevertheless, all appear together in a tangle of weather, atmosphere, pollution and anxiety. Where nature ends and industry begins is indiscernible.

The curatorial rhetoric of *ecoArt China* reveals how the disruption of one element overflows into the disruption of another. As Wen Fang's *Maskbook* shows, people from around the world have had to adapt their lives, and even our very means of breathing, to preserve ourselves from our own pollutions. Contaminated air from the burning of carbon fuels rains into the world's waterways, as does industrial wastewater. As Cherney's work indicate, such poisons alter the landscape, killing the flora on the once bucolic shorelines of Yangtze River. Where water is poisoned, plants and trees draw from a contaminated source leaving wood a ruined trace of vegetal growth as we see from Zheng Chongbin's installation. Once mighty forests are now drained of life and growth. The intersection of water and rock in Cherney's handscrolls further calls to mind the toxic residues from mining—matter that clings to the bodies and faces of miners in Zhao Liang's video installation and mediates the ways we confront industrial labour forces. Through Bovey Lee, we see the transformation of natural forms into urban spaces that are dependent of carbon and nuclear power to fuel their own proliferation. Thus, viewers are invited to span a perspective of our toxic genesis from up-close to the planetary. The displacement of the elements is complete and we look at a synthetic world with one totalizing phase: human waste.

The Sixth Element

Joshua Lewis Goldstein

The art brought together in this volume reminds me of an experience I had at a memorial service that changed how I think about what artists do. The brilliant young woman who had died—thirty-seven years old, mother of two, an aerialist dancer and actress—had her athlete's body laid waste by a vicious cancer that devoured her life in a matter of months. She was deeply loved. One of her friends since they were kids, now a professional musician, played a song on the guitar and sang—I don't remember what song. What struck me as I sat crying like everyone around me was the incredible strength of this singer. He had known this woman since high school, and his singing made everyone in the room weep, yet his voice was steady. He felt every bit of what we all did, but he was a musician and he could sing through it. It was something obvious I never quite appreciated: how artists, in the honed talent of their craft, can wield an almost super-human emotional strength, entering that perilous space where most people experience a kind of self-annihilation, stand there and create.

The work here reverberates with a similar bravery, to create where others might not have the strength. Whether it is Michael Cherney literally dangling off cliffs to bring the Yangzi's enormity to us, or Bovey Lee's imparting through her inconceivably fragile creations the spidery entanglements of nature and industry in which our survival suspends, the artists here wield the mastery of their various media to communicate from the verge of ecological crisis.

In a stroke of curatorial inspiration, Lisa Claypool has arranged these works of environmentally engaged art along the fluid armature of the five elemental phases. The five phases evoke the deep ecological truth that all being(s) on our planet is/are connected, that the living and non-living are bound in processes of be-

coming, decay, and transformative renewal. There is a specificity in these elemental transfigurations. The five phases relate to one another in specific patterns, cycles of generation or overcoming—water nouishes wood, wood feeds fire, fire deposits earthen ash, and so on. Everything is included and connects through webs of specific transformations, even, the art here reminds us, the specific forms of persistent pollution we are weaving into our ecologies.

But it strikes me that, if we are using this framing to understand today's ecological art of China, there is an element missing, a phase that is not included. This sixth elemental phase excels in transformations. Like the other phases, it too obliterates borders and boundaries and merges identities through generative destruction, turning each element into all the others. But it does so differently than the other five. The transformations induced by this phase are not specific, they are not constrained by the cyclical pattern the other five phases follow. Rather this phase transforms each of the elements into all the others willy-nilly; it is transformation abstracted, transformation as both means and ends. The sixth phase, of course, is money, capital.

Capital is what drives the ecological crises that inhabit these works of art. Finance capital, GDP targets, currency trades, export-led growth—the inexorable push to turn some money into more money, to turn M into M′. And how is that done? By making some commodity C at one price and then selling it for a profit, a process Marx summed up in the familiar: M-C-M′. And what is C, the commodity, in this process? It is merely a conduit to make capital grow. It doesn't matter what the commodity is, what it is made of; all of the five elements and their subtle combinations are fair game. Take any of them—metals, woods, products of the earth, and water—combine them with labour power (the cheaper the better) and produce a commodity to sell. What elements are best to use? Whichever makes the money grow fastest—blue jeans, steel, athletic shoes, underwear, flat panel monitors, solar panels, cell phones.

This, of course, is the story of China's economic miracle, its three decades of spectacular sustained GDP growth and the accumulation of trillions in currency reserves. China's expansion of capital has been built on its prowess as the world's factory—turning material inputs, cheap labour, and dirty energy (mainly coal-generated electricity) into commodities for sale internationally. At the same time, on the domestic front, China has plowed the five elements into massive infrastructures intended to grow capacity to produce yet more commodities for more profit. The drivers of capital accumulation behind China's environmentally catastrophic growth

and those that, starting somewhat earlier in modern history, propelled the United States and other OECD countries to the forefront of humanity's headlong charge into ecological collapse, are more or less the same. Still, capital always manifests in unique and specific forms. In China these reflect the territory's unique factor endowments, form of government, its rapidly shifting relationship to global value chains, and Chinese state-capitalism's distinctive approach to land and debt. It is not accidental that these processes figure prominently in the art collected here.

Construction/Destruction

Yao Lu's whimsically dystopian landscapes adeptly deploy tropes from Song period landscape painting, but replace their magnificent and expressive mountain and rock formations with shrouded heaps of waste. Spliced into these panorama, icons of traditional scenic appreciation cavort with emblems of contemporary toxicity: a solitary pavilion, a belching smoke stack, a waterfall, a spilling heap of plastic garbage. Manic consumption has laid waste and overwhelmed the land as far as the eye can see. But there is one form of waste, a very particular form, that dominates and shapes the compositions—construction waste. The green tarps that mould vistas are a common sight to anyone familiar with China today; they are used throughout the country as ground cover for excavation, construction, and demolition sites. When the Beijing government forcibly evicted about one million migrant residents in the freezing months of November and December 2017 on the pretext that their unpermitted apartments and houses were imminent safety hazards, it was these green tarps that were strewn about city's periphery to hide the debris of their demolished neighbourhoods.

Construction waste is a specific manifestation of China's reform-era growth, unmistakably connected with the coercive expropriation of land from common citizens for use by the state and local governments. "Although China's real estate industry only emerged after the privatization of housing in 1998, many of these companies have since grown into powerful behemoths and influential proponents of urban expansion. Conversion of rural land for urban development now accounts for over half of local government revenues…[T]he huge difference between the low rates of compensation offered to villagers and the ultimate value of the land once it is converted to urban uses creates great indignation" (Andreas et al. 2020, 1114, 1129). From 2005 to 2014, around 50 million rural residents were evicted for urbanization and manufacturing development; during that same decade, land loss was the leading cause of rural protests (Chuang 2014, 650). Many of these protests,

in particular the famous collective resistance by farmers in the village of Wukang in 2011, refuted the very idea of compensation for dislocation. Basing their claims on state laws (a process dubbed "rightful resistance" by researchers Kevin O'Brien and Li Lianjiang [2006]), residents insisted, to put it in the terms of this essay, that a particular manifestation of earth, water, wood, etc.—this house of my childhood, this village, and these fields—will not be abstracted into a monetary sum and demolished for profit. But by 2013 researchers throughout China were finding that "existing legal bureaucratic institutions [were] coopting contention by absorbing the aggrieved into state-society interactions calibrated to supplant talk of rights with negotiations over economic concessions" (Chuang 2014, 651).

A similar story emerges from research assessing how villagers respond to industrial poisoning from pollution. By the 2010s, China had hundreds of "cancer villages," rural communities where recklessly polluting factories, often protected by local government agents, are associated with devastating trends of disease, cancer, birth defects, and so on. But researchers have found that in many instances, rather than collectively demand remediation and the removal of the polluters, most farming communities seem resigned to living with the pollution. Rather than organizing in collective protest, most chose instead to negotiate terms for monetary compensation (Lora-Wainwright et al. 2012). Everything can be transmuted into a money equivalent.

Overcapacity/Debt's Eternal Return

Zhao Liang's choices of sites for the images in *Black Face White Face* (taken from his film *Behemoth*)—a coal mine, a steel plant, and the "ghost city" Ordos in Inner Mongolia—are hardly incidental. These are not just any sites of ecological devastation and sacrificial labour. Nor has this follow-the-supply-chain story—tracing coal's journey from smothering mine to blistering steel furnace and then to shiny uninhabited city—been chosen at random. *Behemoth* is an unblinking look into the maw of excess capacity and rampant debt accumulation, twin economic pistons driving what Richard Smith (2020) calls China's engine of environmental collapse.

China's prodigious debt and environmental devastation are inextricably linked. Investments don't always turn a profit and M does not always grow into M'; capital follows its own cycles of generation and destruction. Sectors that prove highly profitable become flooded with investments causing excessive growth in the form of asset bubbles, excess capacity, inflated prices. When these bubbles pop, prices tumble,

debts cannot be paid, investors lose their money, and firms that cannot survive the collapse die. If such a collapse is large enough—if the sector losing value is intertwined with other sectors and/or the assets involved are leveraged to fund other assets—the cascading collapse can trigger a national or global economic crisis, as happened when the subprime mortgage crises of 2008 triggered the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers, the US's fourth largest investment bank, setting off an international financial crisis and global recession.

Though business cycles are universal and bad debt inevitable, China can never have a "Lehman moment." The government will never let its state-owned banks and corporations go bankrupt. The result is expansion without contraction, which manifests in the form of uncontained industrial overcapacity.

In the first two decades of China's reform and opening up, building this overcapacity was advantageous, as Victor Shih (2019) explains: "One could say that China expanded through the systematic production of over-capacity in line after line …This dynamic of over-supply generated trade shocks for industries and workers in advanced countries, as fixed investment soared and lower-cost Chinese goods squeezed the profits of producers abroad. But workers and corporations in China benefited mightily from it, as it detonated an unstoppable process of expansion that allowed China to avoid recession and unemployment for decades" (71). But overcapacity is by definition inefficient and unprofitable, resulting in oversupply, declining prices, and waste; over time, such enterprises will amass bad debt and eventually go bankrupt and die. But death is not an option; instead, state banks roll over the distressed debt of state-owned enterprises, often year after year, until they become "zombie enterprises," a term even Chinese state media has come to use. And this problem is not confined to a few enterprises or sectors. It is systemic. In 2008 China's total non-financial sector debt was only about 140% of its GDP, which was nearly US$5 trillion at that time. Today China's GDP has risen to US$14 trillion, but China's debt has grown about three times faster, topping US$40 trillion in 2020, over 300% of GPD (Lee 2019; IMF 2017). Other large developed countries have huge piles of debt, but none that grow so rapidly. And each new tranche of loans sets off another round of infrastructure expansion.

The government recognizes the urgent need to rein in credit and shift to a sustainable development model. Xi Jinping, China's president since 2013, has pledged to build an "ecological civilization" that respects the five elements and the humans and biomes they sustain. But the state is trapped in its

debt spiral. In 2019 the *South China Morning Post* reported, "Beijing launched a deleveraging campaign more than two years ago aimed at reducing debt and reining in risky lending, but as the economy has slowed amid the trade war with the United States, the government has eased credit conditions and pushed fiscal spending on infrastructure projects to support growth" (Lee 2019). In 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic provided a similar excuse: "Local government debt … ballooned this year after Beijing raised its fiscal budget deficit level and local government debt quota for infrastructure investment funding to steady the coronavirus-hit economy … [L]ocal authorities relied on 'new borrowing to repay old debts' in about sixty per cent of cases" (Lee 2020).

The eternal recurrence of bad debt—incarnated as ghost cities, industrial parks, disused airports—propels China's unrelenting and destructive "growth." Take cement, one of the most carbon-polluting industries in the global economy: China produces over half the world's cement, ten times more than India, the second biggest producer. In the three years from 2009 to 2011 China poured more cement than builders in the US poured during the entire twentieth century (Smith 2020, 55). In the case of steel, in 2016 China's planners vowed to cut the nation's capacity by 15 percent (about equal to Japan's entire steel output) by 2020, but instead output went from 808 million tons in 2016 to over 990 million in 2019 (Myllyvitra 2020). Coal is even more problematic; China has committed to slowing carbon emissions, yet 2019 saw restrictions on building new coal plants loosen, with over 50 gigawatts of new capacity entering construction, all despite the fact that over half of these companies are losing money and most coal plants operate at under 50 percent capacity (Myllyvitra, Zhang, and Shen 2020). Zhao Liang never names the behemoth that presides over the inferno he documents, and it likely goes by many names, debt being just one of them.

Inside/Outside

According to most carbon accounting systems, China today not only has the highest carbon emissions of any country in the world, but also and more urgently, its emissions are still growing whereas in the EU, and even the US, total greenhouse gas emissions have entered a long-term gradual decline. But international carbon accounting is tricky, and a crucial point of contention is how to count embodied emissions—the emissions entailed in production of products, anything from TVs to t-shirts. Most accounting methods just charge those emissions to the manufacturer of the good, not the consumer, but using this accounting method for China (aka "the world's factory"), which uses a significant portion of its energy (about 50 percent in the early 2000s) to

power factories manufacturing goods that are exported to consumers in the US and EU, seems highly unfair and distorting. In outsourcing the bulk of their manufacturing over the last several decades, the US and EU have also outsourced huge amounts of their industrial pollution loads, including the carbon emissions that enable their outsized levels of consumption.

But now that China has risen on the global supply chain, it is getting to do some outsourcing of its own. In 2013 China formally launched its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). A centerpiece of Xi Jinping's foreign policy, the name "Belt and Road" is an explicit reference to the ancient "Silk Road"—networks of land and sea trade routes that connected China with Central Asia, the Middle East, South Asia, and as far as Africa. BRI fuses China's desire to strengthen diplomatic and trade ties with the developing world and China's own specific economic needs—in this case offloading some of it deadening excess capacity. BRI provides hundreds of billions in loans to scores of developing countries in Asia and beyond primarily to contract Chinese state-owned enterprises to undertake massive infrastructure projects—to use China's millions of excess tons of steel and concrete to build for foreign friends what Chinese engineers have gotten tremendously good at building: coal-fired plants, dams, ports, bridges, and, of course, New Silk Roads—highways.

Instead of confronting us with the numbing scale of these engineering endeavours and their brutal toll on lands and bodies, Bovey Lee's paper silhouettes weave images of the industrial colossus we inhabit into patterns of the natural world, reminding us that, for the most part, our entanglements with these industrial infrastructures are not apocalyptic confrontations of nature vs. machine but a relaxed, seamless, even soothing traversal and mixture of both. Every day we effortlessly call on coal-fired power plants to enable the technological magic that makes our work and leisure possible; those thermal-plant towers of billowing clouds are the stuff of both our fantasies and nightmares: rocket ships, butterflies, and a sky raining balls of fire.

There is, without doubt, a good deal of prestidigitation in Lee's work; the detail and delicacy can be arresting, astonishing. But the overall effect of the design is flowing and the paper-cut medium itself is gently insistent: everything is literally of one piece, everything is on one undifferentiated plane, smooth and inseparable—nature and machine, the environment and the forces destroying it are, in reality, one. In *Rake*, Lee lays down lane after lane of highway, excessively wide, yet still bumper to bumper with cars. We glimpse the traffic streams, not through belches of smog but through patterns of leaves—maybe tree canopies, or perhaps the title *Rake* is to imply these

are autumn piles? There is nothing in the image that tells us where this highway is; it is as easily a jammed ring-road in Beijing as a freeway in Los Angeles. The highway stretches to the horizon and clearly keeps going, reaching into the far distance, beyond the paper, beyond the borders, not unlike the visions conjured by the Belt and Road concept—highways stretching beyond China's borders, connecting China, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, and beyond into one great network of trade, cooperation, and environmental ruin. We usually think of roads as taking us to a different place from where we are, but this road doesn't seem to do that, it seems to just extend indefinitely but offer no escape. Whether it is through outsourcing our polluting industries, or building landfills and incinerators, or indulging in fantasies that we can create some magically sustainable form of capitalism where the sixth element will harmonize with the other five in forming zero-waste, non-toxic cycles of generation and nutritive degeneration (the utopian notion captured in the recycling arrows symbol—the fantasy of perpetual motion without entropy)—we are deeply attracted to the hope that somehow there is an "away" where we can escape the toxicity and damage and exploitation of our environmental emergency. Rake gently insists, there is no "away."

Zhao Liang's *Behemoth*: Ecoart's Ironic Paradise

Daniel Fried

Zhao Liang's documentary art film, *Behemoth* (悲兮魔兽), opens with a slow and blank shot of an empty, open-pit iron mine, a massive crater of dirt in the dry steppeland of Inner Mongolia. Time passes; an audience accustoms itself to the blankness of the screen, and the land. And then an explosion at the lower right, intended to shake loose a new section of ore, expels a shower of dirt, and sound, and motion. The scene shifts: another explosion, closer and centred in the screen; and then another. And then another shift, to a close-up shot of a dynamite blast, as if from the inside: chunks of dirt twirl in slow motion past the vantage point. This is when we are given the title card, and its biblical allusion: 上帝在第五日创造了比蒙巨兽。它是陆地上最大的生物，每日吞噬一千座山峰。"God created the beast Behemoth on the fifth day. It was the largest monster on earth. A thousand mountains yielded food for him."[1]

The tension between explosive force and an overlaid flat and silent experiential plane is key to the aesthetic dynamics of the film, a visceral examination of the monstrous damage inflicted on landscapes and on humans by large-scale mining operations. Zhao's previous documentaries, such as *Together* (在一起, 2010) and *Petition* (上访, 2009), dissected exploitation and injustice through extensive direct interviews with those affected by AIDS or bureaucratic injustices, in a vérité style. Such work has reasonably been described as "a frontal, demonstrative, and unaestheticized 'activist-exposé mode' of filming" (Li 2010, 39), and those films' stylistic difference from *Behemoth* is stark. During the process of filming the latter, Zhao also conducted extensive interviews with miners from various iron and coal mines in Inner Mongolia. However, during the editing process, he decided to make a radical stylistic break with his past practice, eliminating all voices but the narrator's from the cut. We see

[1] Not a direct biblical quotation, this epigraph can be considered a loose rewriting of Job 40.

the bodies of miners, see their darkened faces looking into the camera following a shift, watch them breathe from oxygen tanks in the hospital. But they are made into visual entities, mute as the ruined landscape. The result is no longer documentary reportage but an art film constructed out of the materials of documentary.

This is not a technique original to Zhao. As Kiki Tianqi Yu (2019) has argued, the "essay film" style of art cinema was developed by mid-twentieth-century French movements, and is known among Chinese filmmakers as "image-writing" (*yingxiang xiezuo* 影像写作). Yu also suggests that *Behemoth* in particular has aesthetic affinities to traditional Chinese essay genres. However, according to Zhao himself, the primary influence between his aesthetic shift is not past cinematic or literary practice, but his own attempt to bring more of the feel of video art into a cinematic production:

> I find the conventional documentary filmmaking and its linear form limiting. It doesn't satisfy what I crave in filmmaking anymore. When people watch a documentary, they tend to have certain expectations. It is constraining. When I work on a video installation for a gallery space, it is relaxing and I feel more at liberty with the material. I wanted to combine the two. So it means experimentation of some kind in the film, and introducing some aesthetic interest from contemporary art, in terms of perception and understanding of art. I do find contemporary art nourishing in this respect. I don't want to limit myself to the documentary perspective. (Lu 2015, 96)

Paola Voci's (2010) assessment of the aesthetics of Zhao's video art also holds up for *Behemoth*: "Subjectivity here defines authenticity, rather than negotiates with it. Unlike the documentarian described by Joris Ivens who, standing in the middle of reality, '[a]t every occasion, only chooses to interpret part of that reality,' Zhao clearly manipulates reality to show its hidden, true meaning" (111).

Throughout that film, the manipulation of the reality of industrial mining takes the form of a re-enactment of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and most of the narrator's occasional commentary consists of rewritten versions of the poem.[2] After the opening credits, we are given a series of shots of hellish pits, from which thick smokes arise. A voice then intones a revised version of the first canto of the *Inferno*:

> 在人生的中途，我似乎做了一个梦。梦中，我被一些沉重的爆炸声惊醒。睁开双眼，发现烟雾弥漫。身下那片

[2] In several interviews, Zhao has noted that the connection of the hellish landscapes to Dante was suggested by his French producer, Sylvie Blum; he then read through the *Divine Comedy* while driving across Inner Mongolia between filming locations. See Lu (2015, 96), for example.

焦炙的土地让我感觉到已身处一个幽暗的地方。环顾四周才发觉我已来到这地狱之窟的边缘。这是一个被摧毁的地方。它曾经山泉汩汩，草木葱茏，如今却寸草不生，一片死寂。在那里，我遇见一个向导。他背负破碎的镜像，行走在风尘里。它来自的那座山并不通往彼岸。他不会写诗，但从他肺腑发出的气韵却不逊于《神曲》。

Midway on our life's journey, I seem to have had a dream. In the dream, I was suddenly awoken by the sound of heavy explosions. I open my eyes onto a boundless smoky haze. The smouldering ground beneath my feet makes me feel I am in some dark, desolate place. Only looking all around me do I discover I have arrived at the pit's edge of the inferno. This is a place that has been destroyed. Once upon a time, it gushed with mountain springs and was lush with vegetation. Now not a blade of grass survives, a land of deathly silence. There, I meet a guide, burdened with a heavy portrait of the dead, walking, weary from his dusty journey. The mountain he comes from offers no path to paradise. He does not know how to write poetry, yet the eloquence his heart exhales is no less powerful than the *Divine Comedy*.[3]

[3] This quotation is reproduced in both original Chinese and English subtitles used in international release. There is a mismatch in the translation: the "heavy portrait of the dead" is in fact a "broken mirror" (*posuide jingxiang* 破碎的镜像). However, Zhao has confirmed in a private interview that he did indeed originally conceive of the mirror as a kind of funeral portrait (Zoom interview with Daniel Fried and Lisa Claypool, October 12, 2020).

The "guide" is a mine worker in the place of Vergil, carrying a mirror on his back, in which we see reflections of the sky. Throughout the remainder of the film, further quotations from Dante are spliced in among the mute spectacles of above-ground mine work, below-ground mine work, dormitories, smelting pits, and hospital wards. Every recitation of Dante is overlaid upon a simple shot of the ruined landscape, in which splices to the picture have split the frame into dislocated shards, mimicking and sometimes overlaying the deep, clifflike cuts through geological strata within the mine walls. During these scenes, a lone male figure lies naked on the dirt of the foreground space, curled into fetal position, unmoving. The figure is played by Zhao's sound tech,[4] but he represents the Dantean narrator, viewed naked as if from a divine perspective, stripped of everything: technology, clothes, motion (Zhao 2020). The Dantean narrator has become an everyman: lost in the middle of a life's journey, suddenly surrounded by the walls of smoking pits.

Many of the more panoramic shots of open-pit mines are constructed looking out towards the lip of the mine area, from grassy sections of the steppe. In the foreground is life: greenery, human observers, sheep.

[4] This role is uncredited in the film, but Zhao revealed his identity during a 2016 interview at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (ICA, 2016).

In the background: dirt, rock, machinery, smoke, the echoes of motors. This composition was necessitated by the conditions of filming: Zhao's camera could be set up most easily for such shots from the outside of the minelands, looking in towards the industrial areas. But the resulting compositions fit a striking pattern. Foregrounded life appears on the bottom of the screen, often the bottom third. The top two-thirds are occupied by the space of lifeless and mechanized land, seemingly pressing on and weighing down the space of green nature: a visual suffocation.

Throughout the film, we oscillate between images of landscape, human, and machine. The machines rumble, and the landscape is overlaid with the whistling of wind past Zhao's sound equipment. The humans remain mute: they are left as the unspeaking subalterns of this story. The lone instance of human language that we are offered from the workers over the whole film is a single character, 忍 ("endure"), written as a reminder and self-command on the wall beside the top bunk in a workers' dormitory. We are never told anything else of their feelings or their thoughts—only shown what it is that they must endure. We see them at home: dirty dormitories, small concrete houses, patched yurts. At work they labour directly on the dirt with ancient hand tools, at the control panels of large industrial earth-movers,

beside smelters pouring forth streams of steel. We are shown their faces, unwashed, in close-up. We see them hospitalized with lung disease. There is an uncomfortable politics to this approach: Zhao's choice to cut his interviews from the final edit renders these humans silent models in a tableau vivant of industrial exploitation. It is a choice made more remarkable by his stylistic turn away from the vérité reportage of his earlier work: as Dan Edwards (2015, 141–52) has argued, *Petition* and *Paper Airplane* (纸飞机 , 2001) draw a considerable amount of their aesthetic power from the ethical entanglement of Zhao in the lives of his interview subjects, to the point where the presence of the camera in the story becomes a vehicle for cruelty. In *Behemoth*, there is no engagement, only a pornography of exploitation, more prurient than sex work: the film privileges its audiences as spectators of degradation. But this is a cost of Zhao's formal innovation that must be paid: his is an art that must refuse to transmit voices, as it argues that only machines have the right to be heard in this hushed landscape.

And the spectator's privileged position as a presumably urban and post-industrial viewer of art film is itself ultimately called in to question. The film ends with a visit to a mock-Dantean Paradiso: Ordos, Inner Monglolia.[5] Ordos New City is the most egregious example of China's contemporary "ghost cities:" built during a real-estate bubble as investment vehicles, but never occupied, Ordos features mile after mile of unoccupied high-rise apartments. Zhao's narrator has followed the track of the smelted steel there, to its apotheosis in the empty towers—a place of cleanliness, peace, and quiet. Or, more accurately, a place of blankness and silence, "pitiful urban lacunae," in the words of one original reviewer (Marsh 2017). From those lacunae, the narrator states, 然而，这不是一个梦。这是我们。我们就是那魔兽。那魔兽的爪牙。("And yet, this is no dream. This is who we are. We are that monster, the monster minions.") This is not the kind of urban space from which most audiences will watch *Behemoth*, but it is a closing statement that reminds elites that we are implicated in the system of industrial capitalism that delivers us our comfortable living spaces. Voices of the miners and millworkers have been deleted from the film; they have also been deleted from the lives of most residents of the global metropole.

However, in that respect, the use of voiceless workers as material for art is no different from the relationship of either art or industrial capitalism to the natural world. Modern ecocriticism, from its origins in the 1970s, has learned to make long-overdue criticisms of the anthropocentric character of many traditional cul-tures; but there is as yet no reliable methodology to let natural subalterns "speak" in a way that can be easily translated into the forms of either art or

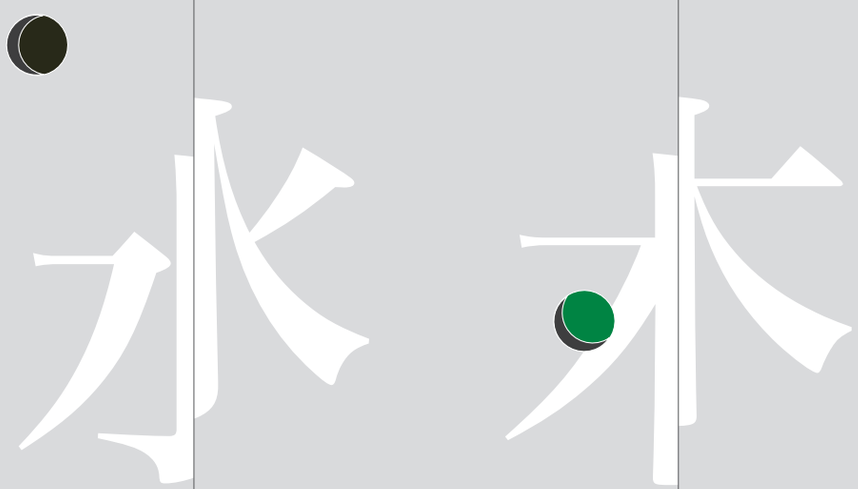
[5] Zhao has noted that "Ordos" means "the palace in heaven" in Mongolian (Lu 2015, 96).

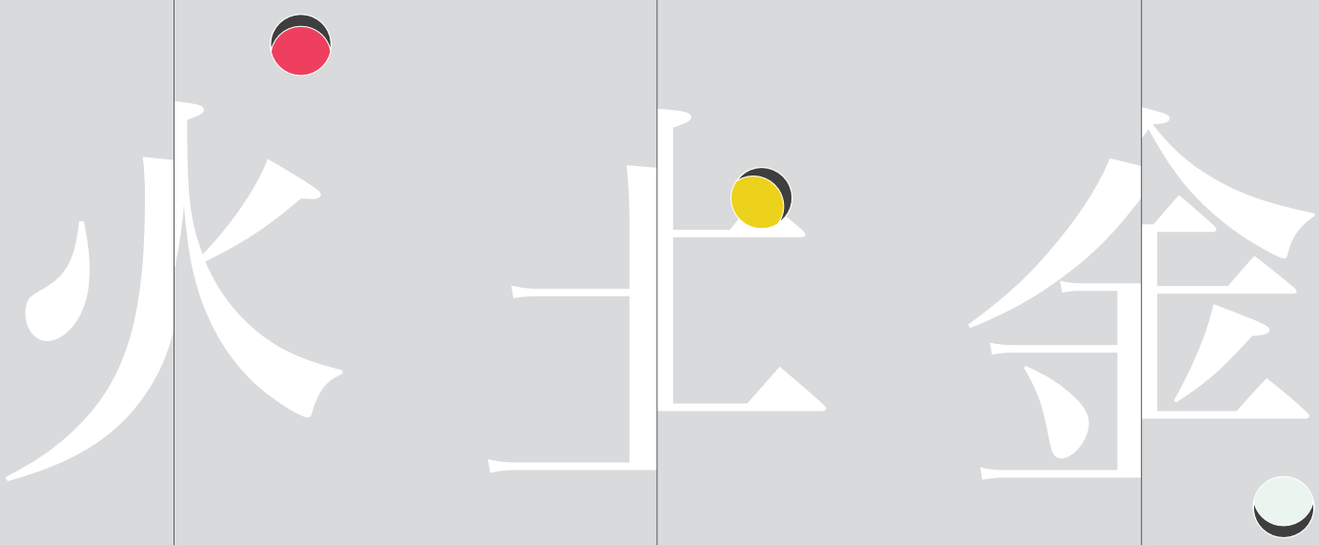
criticism. Although this seems not to have been Zhao Liang's primary intention, as a work of ecocritical art, *Behemoth* centres choices about what and whom can be appropriated for whose use. Zhao's aesthetically-attuned lens, along with his staged nakedness, Dantean narration, and meticulous editing, captures both the landscape and its inhabitants, and converts them into a form of quiet and empty urban art, not unlike the unoccupied investment-driven ghost city of Ordos.

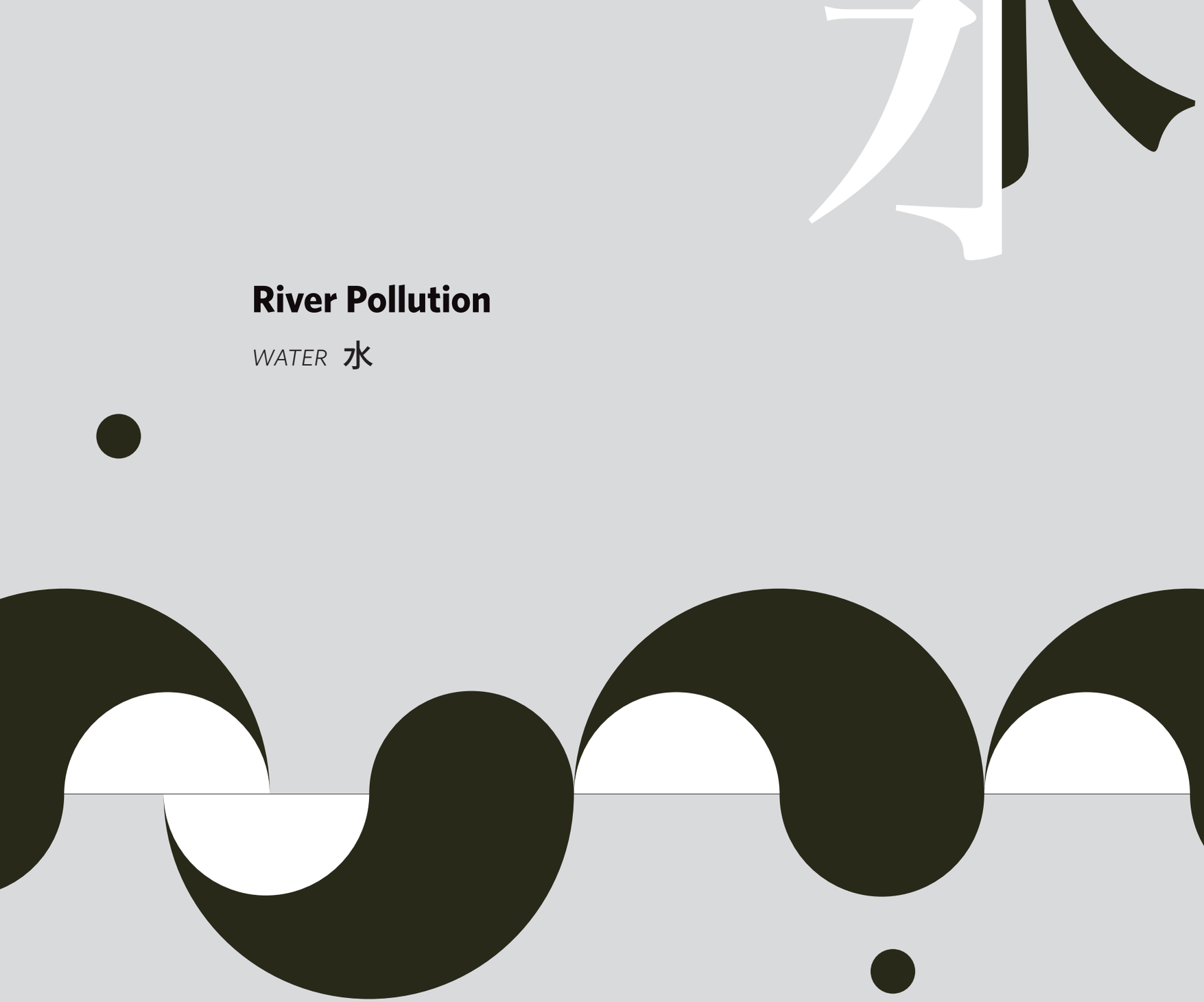
Zhao (2020) has said that he is driven as an artist to bear witness but does not think that art can effect social or political change. Behemoth has not put an end to strip-mining in Inner Mongolia, but it is up to audiences to choose whether the witness it bears will be fruitful. The film's re-enactment in art of industrial capitalism's capturing of natural resources for the use of urban elites is not a form of hypocrisy—the camera does not destroy the land or lives it observes. But the highly aestheticized form, as much as the content, reminds us that we are implicated in the system that it presents to us. We are free to decide if a globally metropolitan Paradiso, from which sub-national Infernos are only distantly visible, can be stable, rather than merely static.

PART II

ARTISTS







River Pollution

WATER 水

WATER is one of the essential elements we live with every day. It exists everywhere in various forms and is recognized in different ways. It enters our body with the air we breathe. It carries our happiness and laughter when it solidifies as snow and ice, providing us with a playground in cold and dark winter. Its ability to put out fire was expressed in the royal library Wenyuan Ge 文淵阁 (The Hall of Literary Erudition), built for the Qianlong emperor in the 1770s. The building is the only one in the Forbidden City covered with black roof tiles, for the colour black is associated with water in the Five Phases. Tiling the library's roof black was to summon cosmological forces to ensure the safety of the emperor's precious books. But among all the connections humans have built up around water, its most popular association is with life. Rivers are Earth's blood vessels. As the longest water artery in Asia, the Yangtze River is the life blood of China.

The Yangtze River originates in the Tibetan Plateau and flows from west to east. It travels for about 6,300 kilometres before joining the East China Sea. Its water course currently traverses one-fifth of China's land area and passes through eleven provinces (Dong 2001, 3). The textual record of the Yangtze River traces back to the Warring States period (Wang 1982, 66). Because of the river's long history and the expansive capillary network, a water-related crisis in the Yangtze River can affect countless lives. For example, the estimated number of people affected by July 2020 by the flood was larger than 37 million (Wong 2020). To some extent, such disasters reflect a general water crisis in China. In a recent report on the Yangtze River produced by China Water Risk, the Yangtze River's role is recognized primarily as economic; the

Yangtze River Economic Belt has been generating over 45 percent of the country's GDP during the last five years (Hu, Tan, and Xu 2019, 11). Yet industrial development is causing severe water pollution and the Yangtze River Economic Belt now faces a shortage of usable water for agriculture, industry, and even daily use.

Economic development and the industrial pollution form a vicious circle in which the health and livelihood of animals and plants sustained by the river is constantly traded for economic growth. In the pursuit of growth and development, the Yangtze River is valued primarily for its ability to assist the economy. It is only when the economy is threatened that the problem of pollution starts to catch attention.

Flooding is another crisis in the Yangtze River, which has happened often in recent decades. Floods have rapidly increased in frequency from about once every ten years to almost every year. The instability of the water course happens in part because of chronic loss of vegetation along the upper and middle sections of the river (Wu 1998). It leads to the erosion of land where the water flow is strong, and a weakening of natural boundaries that contain the surging river. Further, mud and sand are carried by the torrent and deposited when the water flow slows. By the end of 2018, such erosion along the Yangtze River amounted to about 20 percent of the land area that the river course covers which, in turn, is a mark of and contributes to the increasingly recurring flooding in the Yangtze River (Shuilibu 2019, 2).

Why has there been a loss of vegetation around the river? In the 1950s and the 1970s, loss of forest and woody plant growth by the river was connected to political movements like the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, driven by Chairman Mao's instigation that humans could conquer nature and convert it into farm land. In the 1980s and the 1990s, such rhetoric was exchanged for an emphasis on economic growth (Wu 1998).

But the end result is the same: deforestation continues, and the floods continue to increase in frequency.

Water pollution and flooding are crises that we do not fully comprehend until we meet them face to face. It is easy to put them out of our minds. We need to remind ourselves again that water exists in various forms and affects our lives in multiple ways every day. We need to re-examine our notion of water as a source of life and the way we are sustained or damaged by it, and especially how human activities shape and transform rivers, those arteries of water feeding us and the earth.

| Han Li |

MICHAEL CHERNEY

秋麦

Michael Cherney 秋麦 . ***Yuezhou* 岳州** . ***Ten Thousand Li of the Yangtze River series* 长江万里图** . 2012.

Ten Thousand Li of the Yangtze River: Yuezhou

长江万里图: 岳州

This panoramic image, mounted as a handscroll, depicts a course of the Yangtze River in which a number of watercraft float. The ships within the river's waters appear to be travelling from left to right, like the hands on a clock, and against the direction in which the scroll unfurls. This directional path seems to suggest they are going forward in time and heading off into the future, disappearing into the horizon. Behind these ships, crowded in thick fog and smoke, are the ghostly traces of an industrial port.

Michael Cherney 秋麦 . ***Yuezhou* 岳州** .
***Ten Thousand Li of the Yangtze River series* 长江万里图** . 2012.
42 scrolls. Handscroll; photographic print on Chinese *xuan* paper; 27 cm in width.

The lengthy format of the scroll references the length of the river itself—the Yangtze River is so long and large that even the giant containerships travelling within its water are dwarfed by its scale. A small ship carrying and propelled by a dimly visible human figure heightens the monumental size of the river.

Cherney's use of black and white film creates a dismal, smoggy atmosphere in which the pollution visible in the air becomes even more evident. Cherney created this scroll through a painstaking process, stitching multiple 35 mm analogue photographic prints into a panorama, before scanning and enlarging each frame to ten times its original size. Through enlarging the photo negatives, the

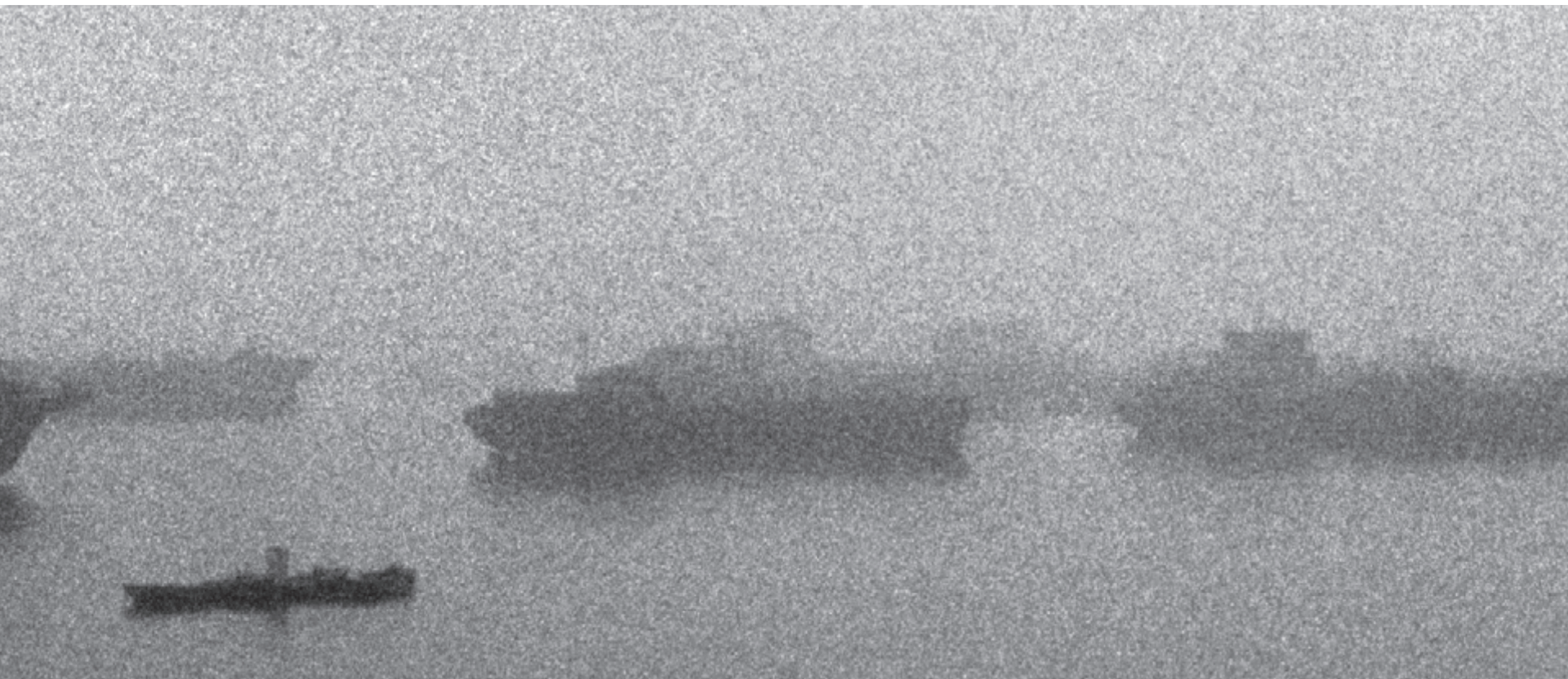
film grain of the medium becomes obvious and exaggerated, and the atmosphere of smoggy obscurity is heightened.

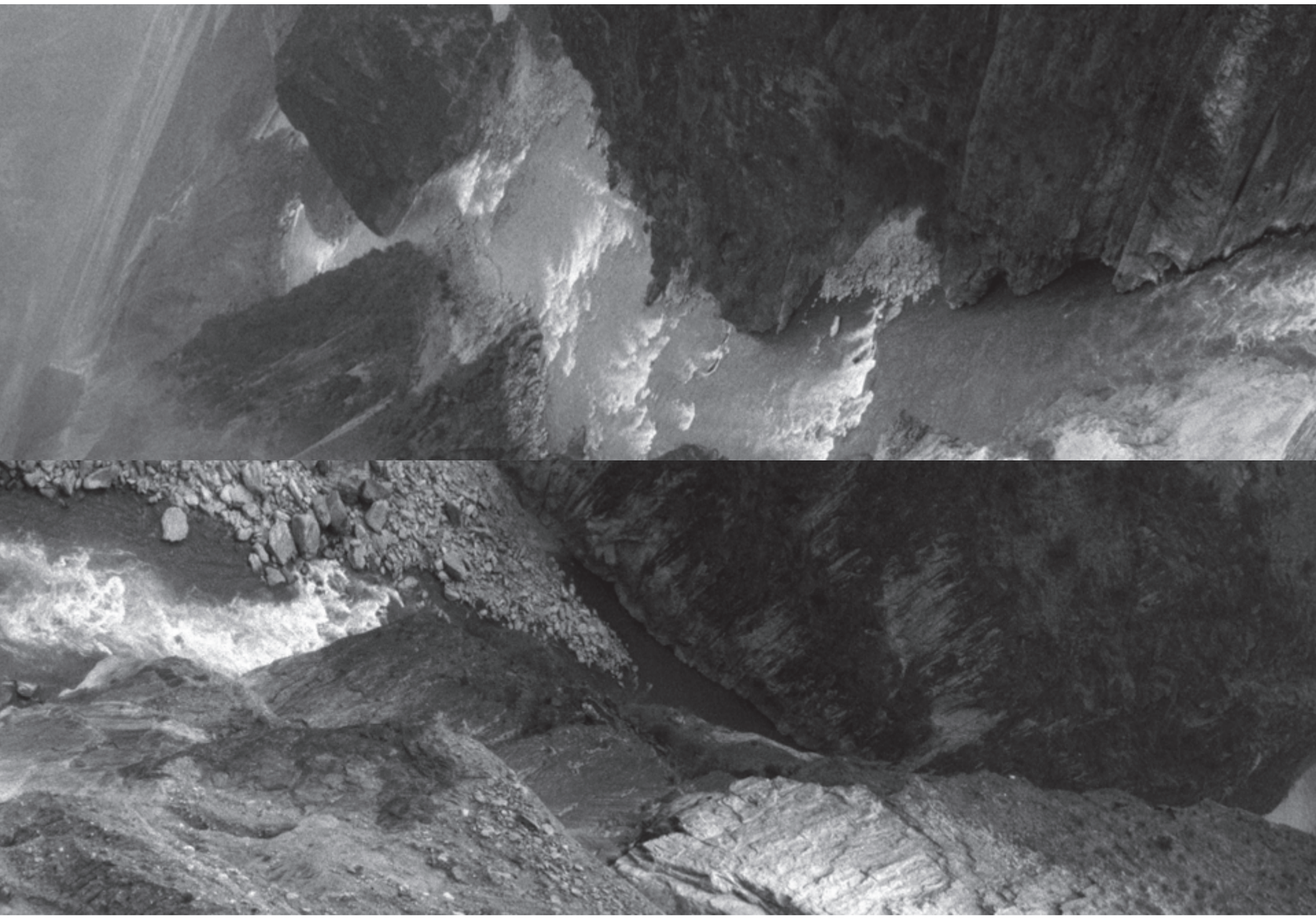
The photographic printing process also increases the picture's mysterious aura. Using a digital printer, Cherney transferred the enlarged images via inkjet onto a traditional ink painting paper scroll. On this paper, the ink is destabilized and further abstracts itself from the original film negative. The process used to create the images, in combination with the content, creates an atmosphere in which time seems to stop.

In this universe of paused time, a melancholic space is created in which the artist gestures to the past, present, and future of China. The past is considered in Cherney's allusions to the scrolls of late imperial China, which he references in the handscroll format as well as in the Yangtze River as subject, one long favoured by painters.

The present is considered in the contemporary subject matter of the container ships and buildings as well as the photographic process through which the work has been created. Finally, the artist points us to the future by creating a composition that seems to historicize the current day and positions us as viewers looking at an artwork as if the present has already become the past.

| Thomas Weir |





Michael Cherney 秋麦 .
Tiger Leaping Gorge* 虎跳峡 *(Hutiaoxia).
***Ten Thousand Li of the Yangtze River series* 长江万里图** . 2012.
42 scrolls. Handscroll; photographic print on Chinese *xuan*
paper; 27 cm in width.

Ten Thousand Li of the Yangtze River: Tiger Leaping Gorge

长江万里图: 虎跳峡 (Hutiaoxia)

What is a river? Michael Cherney gives us a hand-scroll to consider this question and an opportunity to observe the agency of a river. His representation of the Tiger Leaping Gorge unsettles our notion that rivers are simple passages of water. Our viewing experience is suspended in a pictorial space that shimmers between the lucid and the ambiguous. We have to constantly readjust our balance as the visible—what the river offers to us, how it moves towards us—and the visual—what we are made to see in the scroll and what almost escapes our eye—continuously shift.

Cherney's photographic prints let the Yangtze River move and act. The traces of river's unpredictability and magnificence appear in the shadowy images of the water and the rock face on black-and-white film. The water marks out the river's curvy, knobby course. The torrents conjure ripples where there is an obstruction and make splashes when they fall. These splashes and ripples form patterns, with their silky traces, and echo shapes on the nearby cliffs. We see an interaction initiated by the water flow—the torrent asserting itself upon the earth as it rushes through the narrow gorge. The images visualize the agency of the water, at times calm, and at other times violent.

Cherney creates in the scroll's images other kinds of transitions—between high and low, faraway and nearby, the dimly misty and glinted clear. There is no distinctive boundary between these paired modalities. They can be apprehended only when they are considered in relation to each other. Together, they generate a subtle, silent transfiguration from photographic accuracy to impressionistic Chinese ink painting and back, to the photograph again. Photography and ink painting collide and meld together much like the water and rocks bump into and reshape each other.

Conveying the pictorial nuances of Tiger Leaping Gorge in the long-lived Chinese painting format of the handscroll demonstrates Cherney's deep understanding of how the object itself works with

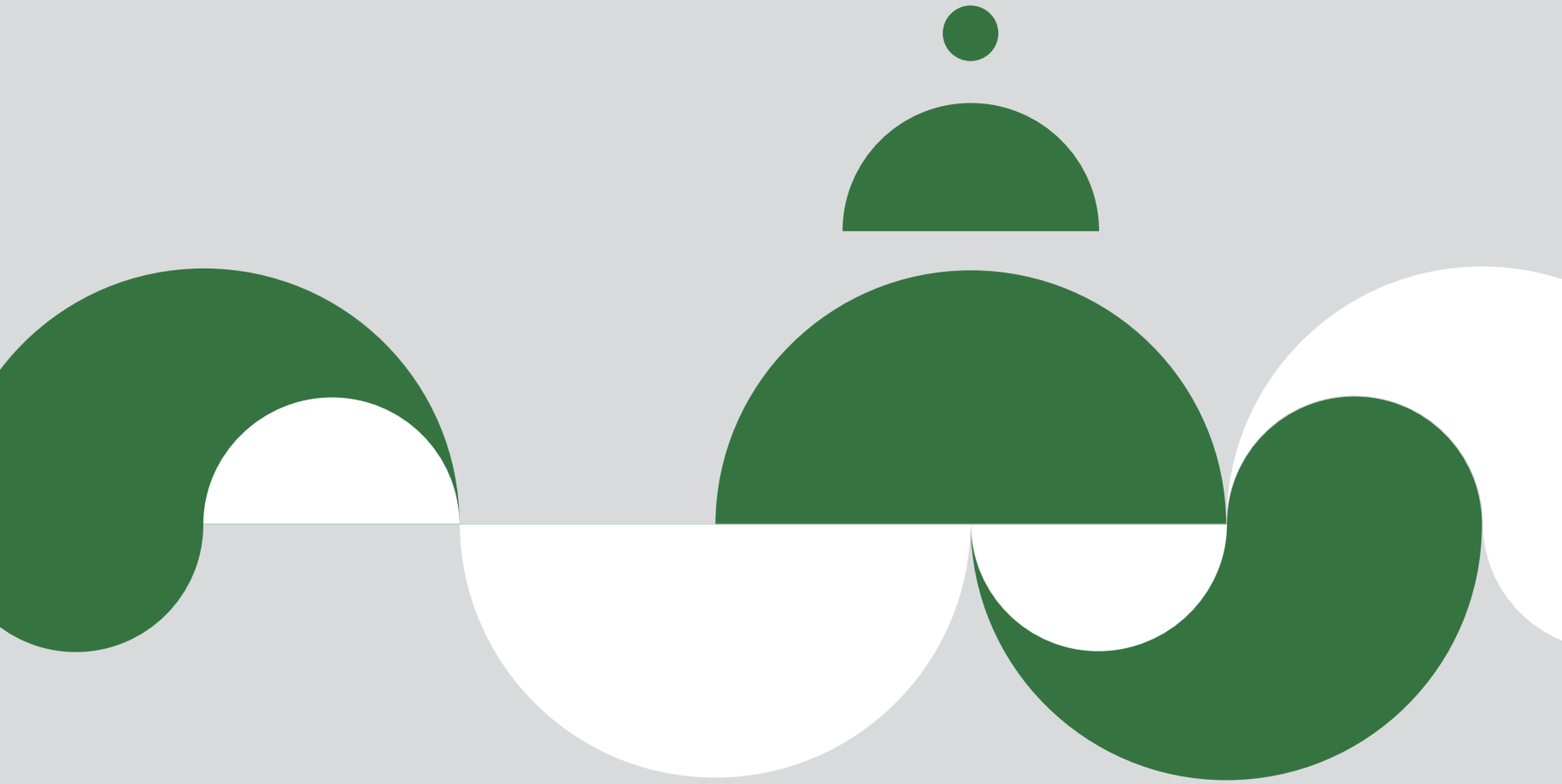
the evocative images of the river to encourage a journey. Wandering in the pictorial image is an experience merged with wandering back and forth along the scroll and could be further linked to wandering through the gorge in reality. *Tiger Leaping Gorge* urges us to learn the expression of the river through vertiginous wandering high above it.

Our gaze towards the river may converge with the artist's, though it may also float freely in other directions, as Cherney well knows. The artist encourages us to go on our own journey into the scroll, to look for the agency of the river in the brush-and-ink-like photographs, to try to locate the connectivity in what we find, and to think hard on the nature of our relationship with this Yangtze River.

| Han Li and Lisa Claypool |

Deforestation

WOOD 木



WOOD, one of the five phases where life takes elemental and material form, is associated with the eastern direction, springtime, the colour green, sourness, morning, and the ability to see. Since sight is one of the correlations of the phase in question, let us try perceiving wood in a different light, one that brings us closer and deeper into understanding the ecological crisis of deforestation.

Conceptually, wood embodies both growth and constraint. A bonsai tree is an excellent example of this dual signification: not content on simply growing a tree, we constrict and control the size and shape of growth to suit our own ends, aesthetic or otherwise. Vaclav Smil (2019, vii), professor emeritus of the Faculty of Environment at the University of Manitoba, defines growth as "a marker of evolution, of an increase in size and capabilities of our bodies as we reach adulthood, of gains in our collective capacities to exploit the Earth's resources and to organize our societies in order to secure a higher quality of life." As our size and capability grow, we are constrained by the material resources necessary to sustain them; growth begets constraint.

Contemporary society relies on wood to grow in order to be harvested for timber, but this reliance is always constrained by the length of time it takes for trees to mature. While it is easy for us to perceive the impact of felling one or two trees for the sake of something like firewood, our relationships to nature have become compounded, entangled through massive changes in the structures of culture and capital across the globe. Research on tree growth is beginning to reveal an important reflection between the element and our contemporary condition: trees are growing fast and dying young (Büntgen et al. 2019).

According to noted sinologist A.C. Graham (1986, 85), within the "conquering" or destructive cycle of the elements, metal (*jin* 金) "cuts into wood." We might consider how the character for metal carries connotations of gold and money, and how flows of capital and development affect forested areas across the globe. For example, analyzing trends of "socioeconomic and environmental interactions across distance," Fuller et al. (2019, 341) find a positive correlation between demand for wood furniture in US markets and harvesting of timber in the Congo Basin in the past two decades; countries neighbouring the sedimentary basin of the Congo River harvest from the richly biodiverse area to export to China where the wood is processed. Unlike the act of felling a tree, understanding flows of globalized demand is anything but clear cut.

To begin to understand the scope of deforestation on a planetary scale is no easy task. In China, one of the largest processing and manufacturing hubs on the planet, cycles of growth and consumption in regards to wood consumption can be traced historically and modelled statistically, showing fluctuations and drastic changes from premodernity to the present era, along with heavy burden during periods of famine and economic pressure (Yang et al. 2018). Some of the first surveys of forest resources after the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) "found that consumption had [already] increased beyond annual replacement levels" (Vajpeyi and Ponomarenko 2001, 99). "Until 1976 most of the natural resources, including forests, were treated as 'free goods'" (Vajpeyi and Ponomarenko 2001, 95). While notable research was conducted in the early twentieth century on the effects of deforestation in correlation with soil erosion (Muscolino 2019), the full scale of forest loss was not understood until

the 1980s and onwards. Only very recently have we begun to consider how complex factors like biodiversity and forest fragmentation (the transformation of a forest into small isolated patches) interact with one another (Liu et al. 2019). How do these patches—once forests that supported complex ecosystems, felled for growth and consumption before being transplanted with foreign or homogenic populations—see the world around them?

Between growth and constraint, wood also embodies the idea of support. In the generating cycle of the five elements, water (*shui* 水) nourishes it, while wood in turn dams earth (*tu* 土). Without the structure of tree roots, complex configurations in specific environments in their own right (Chu et al. 2019), soil is vulnerable to erosion from flooding along with becoming sterile or barren from human activity. As economic growth drives onward and natural resources are strained tighter, how much longer can we rely on the support of the trees?

| T.M. Mamos |

ZHENG CHONGBIN

郑重宾

Eroded Strata 风化的石层

Eroded Strata seems like spread-out pages within a book; two panels appear as if bound together with diagonal lines on both sides, drawing attention to the split in the middle. Where white acrylic and dark ink fuse into a gray shade, the surface below the paint seems like time-worn paper. At the bottom of the image, washes of ink bring a hint of unity between the two sides. Though the juxtaposition of light and dark in the left panel differentiates itself from the tundra-like white of the right, differences in colour combinations, intensity, and contrast resist any simple "reading" of the work. Rather than reach for the analogy of a book, then, let us instead consider the work as something else entirely, and treat it as a *landscape*; where the "variety" of parts that construct the "whole" of nature invites our gaze to roam between sections while contemplating the complete image (Jullien 2018, 10).

How, then, do we view *Eroded Strata* as a landscape? We might become aware of the fact that, despite the juxtaposition in colour and intensity, the diagonal lines in both panels are repetitions in design, as if we were looking at two satellite images capturing a view of an adulterated stretch of land from the upper limits of our atmosphere at two different times. Within the panels, ink-based maculations radiate from the top downwards, as if the canopy of a petrified forest were allowing inverted light to break through its emergent layer, or, in the opposite direction, as if lines of transportation routes were cutting up across a mountain range and letting their presence be felt through the pollution and exhaust left behind.

Zheng Chongbin 郑重宾 .
***Eroded Strata* 风化的石层** . 2015.
Ink and acrylic on Chinese *xuan* paper; 177 x 184 cm.

The central dividing line formed between the two panels, contrasted through exposed paper, swirls of ink and layers of acrylic, both *reinforces* and *destabilizes* the unity of this landscape. Between the two panels we see germinal connections through the mixing of colours, as if tiny microbial cultures are blooming and sprouting in the presence of one another, bridging the gap between the two panels through discreet, contained interaction and shading of colours. It is as if the two panels are *living together as one*.

Precisely because the work draws the viewer in and questions the boundaries of ideas like "landscape" and "variety," there is no totality within the work. There is certainly constriction and controlled brushwork, but it is juxtaposed with what seems to be random spills of ink and variations in repetition; the imagined

perspectives of what aspects constitute “landscape” are mediated through various layers of perception. These macro- and micro-level focal points are rendered through ink, white acrylic, and *xuan* paper, revealing to us just how much of ourselves we project onto the materials involved. From the multitude of possible levels and degrees of perspectives, we might become aware of the instability of our understanding of the environment, of how we see nature and ourselves as part of the pattern within it. We are left wondering, is Eroded Strata is a representation or a presentation of nature?

| T.M. Mamos |

Zheng Chongbin 郑重宾 ,
***Forests* 森林** . 2020.
Ink and acrylic on paper; 145 x 443 cm.

Forests 森林

The trees are painted in carbon black ink, the colour of charred wood. A chromatic tonality that could have been achieved by gradually adding water to the ink is absent. There are no washy passages that slide from black into grey—or, to put it differently, that slide from form into non-form, like the pines transfigured into mist that we see in so many ink paintings. Instead, the black ink takes solid geometric shape.

The paper painting surface itself is parched. It is so water-repellant that it seems almost as if it is repelling the forms on it, as if the trees on it were not painted but cut from child's construction paper and pasted on by the artist, materializing his own vision of a Matisse garden. They aren't, though. Still, there are slices and gaps in the pictorial surface that make the analogy to Matisse's paper cut-outs stick; pieces of paper *are* mounted together. The effect is dark: the painting surface looks like shards of a broken window. Sharp edges and corners overlap and amplify the stiff shapes of the triangular trees painted onto them. If this is a garden, something catastrophic has happened to it.

Zheng painted the picture in reverse, like a printmaker. He first created the black forms on the floor of his studio, then pressed the paper onto them, and then worked the back of the paper with white acrylic and water to give limited horizontal movement to the trees. Strong lines criss-cross the composition where he pushed a stiff brush into the back of the paper. Debris from the floor clings to the painting surface.

Which is to say, the lines and forms are cast into the paper. This is a radical departure from long-lived ink painting practices. However, it still abides by the notion that the thing pictured cannot be separated from the agency of the medium used to picture it. Ink brushstrokes in imperial-era Chinese thinking, as the philosopher François Jullien has shown us, embody the lines of the cosmos. Here the geometric forms so deeply imprinted into the paper do the same kind of work.

Why represent—though maybe a better word here would be *constitute*—a forest where the trees are scorched, bare branches are flecked with debris, and the grove is connected by gaps between the cut pieces of paper? Zheng explains that he painted *Forests* after the wildfires swept through the area around his home in San Rafael: "The California fire season psychologically takes its toll on everyone's mind and you can't get away from it—you feel it in every part of your body. I painted this after visiting a basin in the redwood forest by Santa Cruz. The trees were gone. It was apocalyptic."

| Lisa Claypool |

Air Pollution & Burning Fossil Fuels

FIRE 火

Air pollution generated by the burning of fossil fuels represents the FIRE phase in *ecoArt China*. Wen Fang and the Art of Change's *Maskbook* project features online participants from around the world who share photographs of themselves wearing protective masks-turned-art. Each one dwells on how we breathe and what we breathe. Breathing, it seems, has never been a more critical global issue than it is today.

The COVID-19 pandemic has focussed our attention and awareness on our breath. Our ability to breathe has been impaired by the coronavirus disease and by fear—of being deprived of human touch, of losing our loved ones, of dying. Our ability to breathe has been threatened by a respiratory disease that suffocates us physically and psychologically.

The pandemic also has provided a crash course on connectivity. We have learned the hard way how to effectively wash our hands to save other people's lives, which politicians to vote and not to vote for, who in our social circles have a real sense of civic duty, how to contact-trace, how our economies depend on our ability to stay alive and share spaces.

But the pandemic is teaching us more about breathing clean air and the collective action that will help us to do so—though, this was a lesson we might have learned a century ago. It relates to a global environmental crisis that forced human reclusion from the pandemic has brought even more clearly to our attention: the difficulty of breathing caused by toxins and heavy metals that have leached into the air through the burning of fossil fuels.

We have all likely encountered recent articles about how air pollution decreased due to the pandemic (e.g. Gardiner 2020; Davenport 2020). Some articles show before-and-after photos of the air over various landscapes around the world (Hoeller 2020). Our need to stay at home, it seems, significantly slowed down the world economy and, as a consequence, reduced the emission of air pollutants by industry and transportation, and in China, the burning of coal.

But the real picture is not as clear as the "after" photographs. Studies on the air quality in China during the pandemic lockdown reveal what kind of air pollution was reduced in the country as a result of cordon sanitaires ("lockdowns") and reduced human activity. A study by Silver et al. (2020) finds that the concentrations of nitrogen dioxide—a potent pollutant—and particulate matter (PM) were significantly reduced during the lockdown months relative to yearly projections, but the concentration of ozone was only slightly affected. PM and ozone are the most harmful air pollutants to human health. PM can penetrate deeply into the lungs and travel through the bloodstream, also affecting the heart. Ozone is highly irritant to the lungs and, like nitrogen dioxide, can worsen respiratory conditions such as asthma (Institute of Physics 2020).

Another study, by Le et al. (2020), finds different results for the concentration of PM in northern areas of China during the lockdown, but similarly concludes that ozone emissions remained an issue. Transport, industry, and power generation were the sectors most affected by the lockdown and are sources of nitrogen dioxide, which could explain lower levels during the lockdown. PM

and ozone concentrations, however, are a result of residential emissions and thus were likely less affected by the lockdown (Silver et al. 2020, 11). As Le et al. (2020, 4) explain, "reductions in NOx [nitrogen oxides] and SO2 [sulphur dioxide] from traffic and manufacturing sectors have long been considered as the normal protocol in implementing regulatory policies. Our work shows that such a protocol achieves only limited effects on particulate matter and ozone levels, without simultaneous emission controls from power plants and heavy industry, such as petrochemical facilities. Therefore, we suggest a more comprehensive regulation of precursor gases from all possible sectors when developing an emission control strategy."

Their recommendation brings attention to previous air quality control protocols in place in China. The air the Chinese have been breathing over the past decades has ranged from astoundingly polluted to less polluted but still dangerous. To be sure, since 1990 the government has devised effective measures for air quality control in the country (Kearns, Dormido, and McDonald 2018). The results have been significant—but they are inadequate. A study by Yin et al. (2020, e386) suggests that the concentration of certain air pollutants "decreased markedly in recent years in China" as a result of regulatory measures, but the concentration of other types of pollutants, such as particulate matter, "still exceed the WHO [World Health Organization] Air Quality Guideline for the entire population of China, with 81% living in regions exceeding the [first WHO targeted decrease of particulate matter], and air pollution remains an important risk factor."

China today remains coal dependent, and is building more coal-fired plant capacity than the rest of the world combined (Yang 2019). Coal is a dirty energy source precisely because of particulate matter emissions (Zhang et. al. 2008). As of late October 2020, some regions in northern China registered air quality levels classified by the World Air Quality Index as "unhealthy," "very unhealthy," and "hazardous," in relation to particulate matter concentrations. This is a haze so pea-soup thick you can feel it on your skin. It sears the lungs and eyes. It transforms the yellow sun into a grey penumbra in the sky.

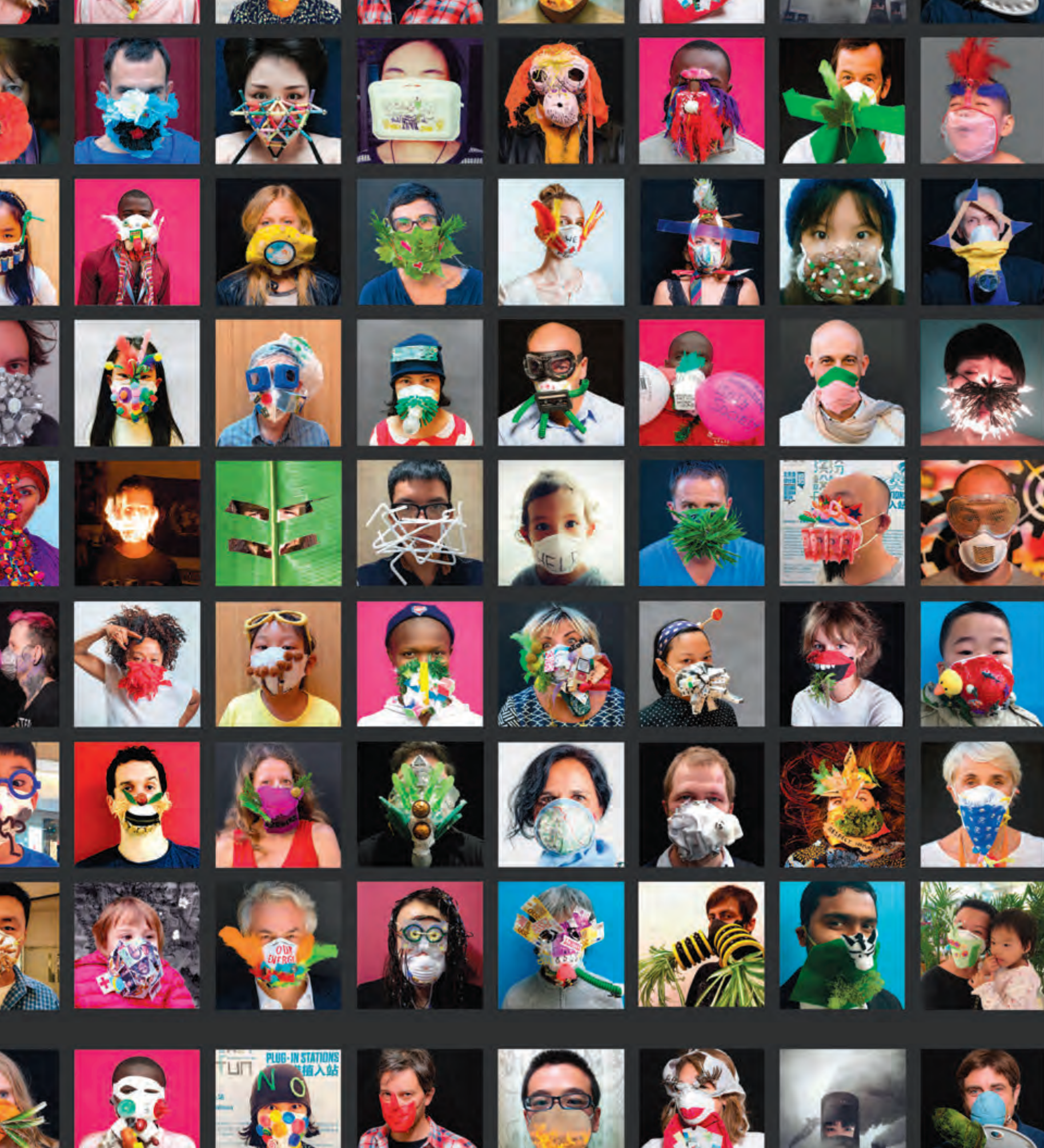
Our collective understanding of the relationships between human activity and air quality has been complicated by COVID-19. But, as a highly contagious and significantly lethal respiratory disease, it has also magnified the urgency for clean air—an urgency that existed long before 2020, and in China, can be indexed to the carbon economy. Before COVID-19, wearing face masks was already a part of Chinese daily life. The burning of dirty fossil fuels made it so. While efforts to contain the spread of the coronavirus may be helping air quality to some degree, poor air quality only compounds its destructive potential and makes the necessity to take action to improve the air we breathe—not only in China but around the world—that much more pressing.

| Mariana Espindola |

WEN FANG

文芳

Wen Fang 文芳 and Art of Change 21, ***Maskbook* 空气口罩** . 2015–present.


PLUG-IN STATIONS
插入站

Maskbook 空气口罩 —Masked Boy

A masked boy wears what vaguely resembles a respiratory mask. His eyes are closed; perhaps he is swept away by his imagination, as children often get lost in fantasy. Bold, blue feathers replace his eyebrows. Their airy feel may remind us of a peaceful childhood—that feeling of being weightless without responsibility and living carefree. His mouth narrows into a circular shape as if he were whistling or singing beneath the restrictions of the mask. Does this respiratory mask help or hinder the boy's freedom to daydream?

The mask itself is a red aquarium dip net, embellished with red feathers that gently float upwards and extend above the boy's head as the tips gracefully curl back. The feathers resemble a phoenix. In Chinese symbolism, a lone phoenix embodies peace and joy, qualities often associated with the young. The lightness of the feathers is juxtaposed with the mask's heavy message about air pollution, underscored in the repeated use of the colour red, which correlates to the fire phase and the burning of fossil fuels that produce air pollution.

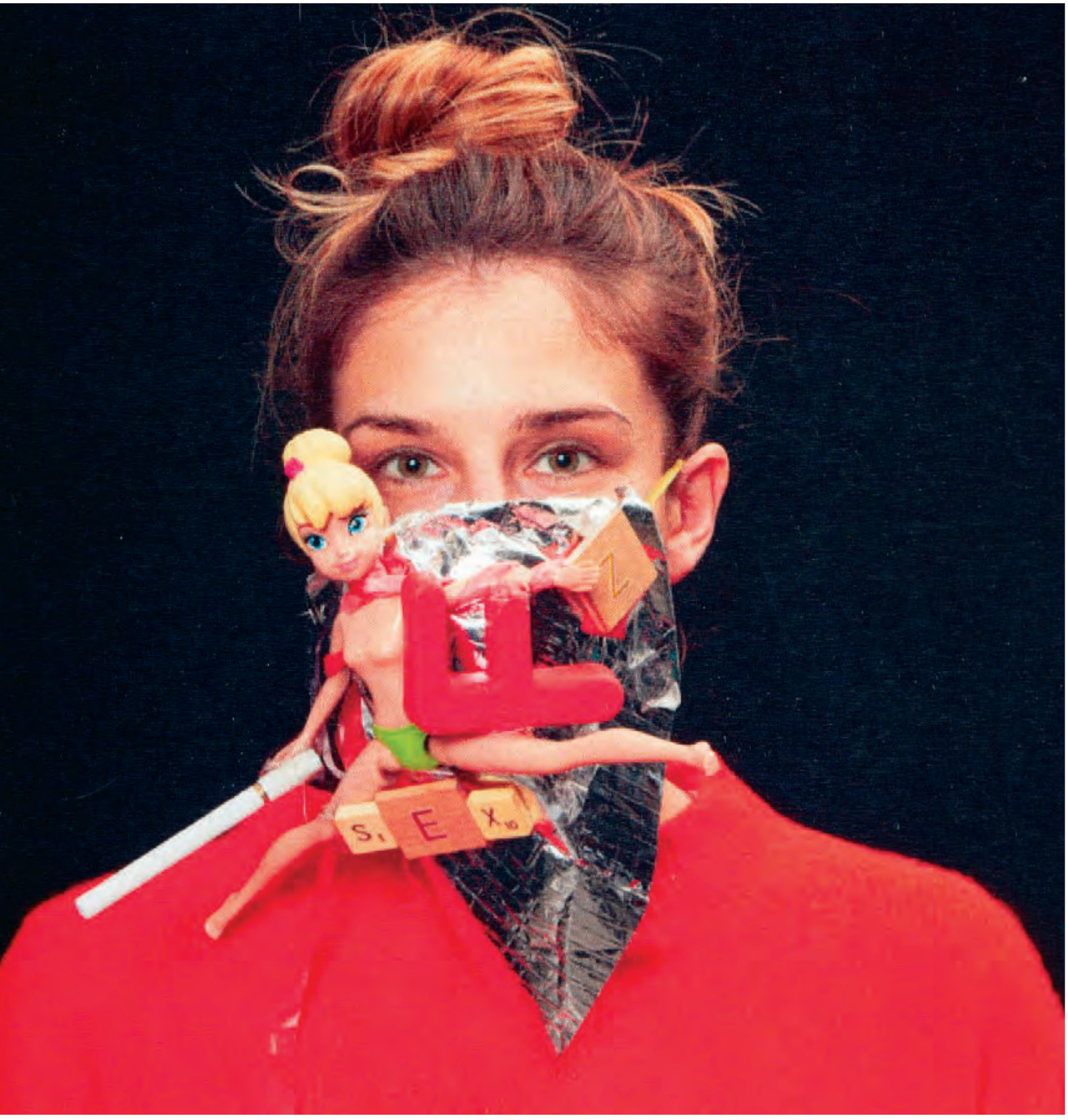
The image of the boy evokes childhood nostalgia and a yearning to continue daydreaming about a clean, healthy future. A mythical creature that burns itself to death and rises from the ashes, the phoenix can renew itself after apparent destruction. While daydreaming, can we imagine Earth's rebirth, much like that of a phoenix?

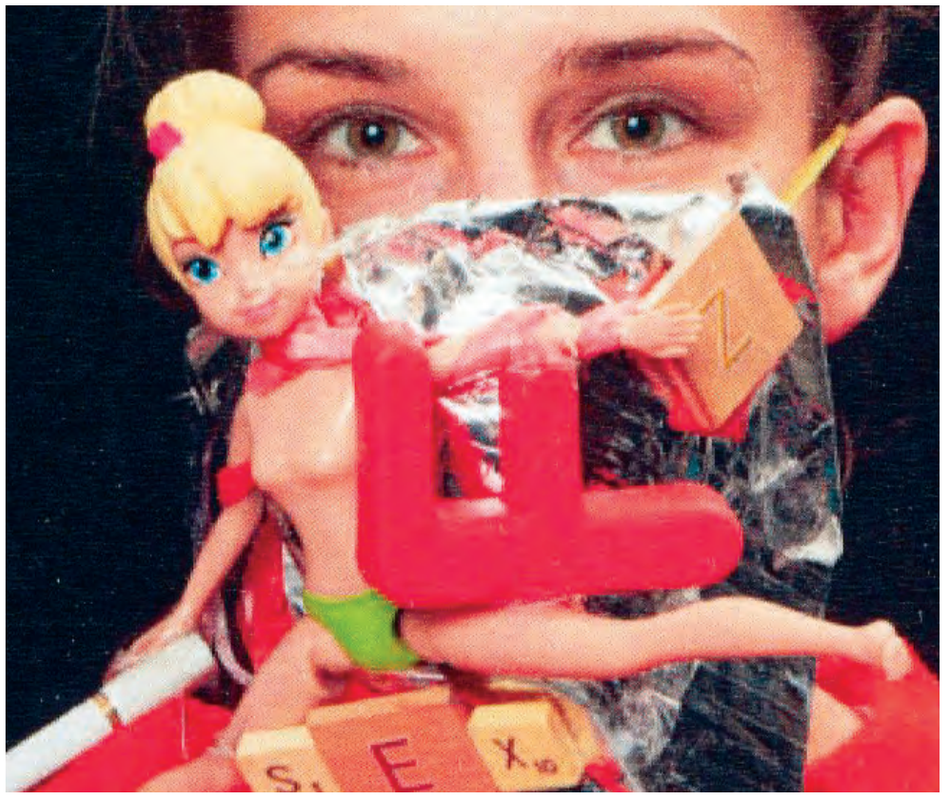
Think about what an unspoiled childhood looks like. Does it call to mind simple pleasures, innocence, and carefree living? Now, imagine that experience being interrupted by doctor's appointments,

breathing apparatuses, and medications. Envision stolen youth, caused by failing ecosystems and natural disasters. Wen Fang's *Maskbook* project contains this portrait of a hopeful boy—her own son, in fact—who has not yet been subject to such experiences.

What changes to your life are you willing to accept to ensure clean air for our children? Where do you stand after considering Wen's work? Do you feel blue or inspired? Picture the legacy we will leave behind: Are you okay with this picture? While reflecting on childhood, are you able to pinpoint the exact moment you lost your sense of enchantment with nature? When did you stop daydreaming? Mind-wandering provides an escape from reality and can bring insight. While looking at the masked boy, does your mind wander towards solutions that can ameliorate today's climate crisis?

| Kourtney Doucette |


SEX


SEX

Maskbook 空气口罩 —The Feminist

There is something very confusing about a naked Tinker Bell doll with legs spread open. But that is one of the main features of "The Feminist," a mask submitted to Wen Fang's online collaborative project *Maskbook*. This particular mask is covered with a sheet of foil cut in an upside-down triangular shape like a leaf. It is the ground for other objects besides the fairy: a cigarette, the word *sex* spelled in wooden Scrabble tiles, and a big letter *F* at the center. The objects and the mask are crudely bound together with transparent plastic tape.

"What has happened to Tinker Bell?," you wonder. Tinker Bell took a step outside Neverland and grew up. She now smokes and has sex. And in this world, sex is *S1EX8*—not a natural, passionate act of losing control, but nature obsessively controlled by science, as if translated into a chemical formula. Tinker Bell learned that the chemical formula produces a chemical weapon used in the war of the sexes. If Tinker Bell identifies as female, she is on the losing side of the war.

She discovered that what makes us unique when we are children is slowly diluted in this world. That dilution had everything to do with the pollution around her. She saw a sea of faces, all wearing masks amidst a thick fog of pollution and realized the masks and the haze effaced the distinctive traits of all those faces. In this world, the trees—of various shapes and sizes, each with unique markings

and images on their barks—are rendered uniform and precise, like polished square Scrabble tiles. Small clones of one another. There, she saw the same loss of distinctiveness. When Tinker Bell found out that cutting down trees to produce things like Scrabble pieces was connected to the pollution fog, it made perfect sense: losing one's identity and contaminating one's lungs are one and the same. It is only natural that she would start smoking.

The hairstyle of the woman wearing the mask—so like that of Tinker Bell—contributes to the effacement of her identity. Which is to say that she, too, is Tinker Bell, the feminist. Her kind of feminism is an intersectional one that sees the many social, environmental, philosophical problems faced by this world as deeply connected. Maybe you do not see the connections. Maybe, when you look at this mask, you are only confused. But is that not how Tinker Bell must have felt when she first stepped outside of Neverland?

| Mariana Espindola |

Garbage Mountains

EARTH 土

Situating the concept of EARTH in contemporary practice, Amanda Boetzkes (2010, 15) suggests "the earth can be considered the basis from which we experience all natural phenomena such as water, air, light, the growth and decay of organism, mists, or hurricanes." As tenants of the earth, we human beings exploit resources from the earth and promote profitable forms of resource consumption by means of technology and industry. The exploitation of resources generates excessive amounts of post-consumer waste. As a result, the earth, the source of consumer goods and waste, in return, becomes a spatial container for them.

As the development of industry and technology has dramatically changed the habits of daily life, the volume of post-consumer waste, such as disposable hygienic goods, packaging, paper products, bottles, cans, food scraps, and plastic, is exploding. Since the 1980s, these waste materials have crossed national boundaries, flowing from developed countries to developing ones, as a result of "labor outsourcing, the lowering of trade barriers, breakthroughs in containerization and shipping, and a virtual pandemic of urbanization" (Goldstein 2012, 342). For a long time, China was the favoured destination of cross-border waste in the world. In 2016, as the leader of global waste recycling trade, China imported 7 million tons of waste plastics and 28 million tons of waste paper, which was over 50 percent of the world's export that year (Xia 2019, 1104). The waste trade contributed to China's industrialization and economic growth enormously, but it has also inextricably generated alarming environmental costs. For example, the global plastic trade has turned Wen'an 文安 , a county in China's northern Hebei province and home to the nation's

largest cluster of family-run plastics recycling business, from "an agricultural region renowned for its streams, peach trees and simple, rolling landscape" (Minter 2014) into a dead zone with nothing green.

In 2017, China announced a foreign waste ban that prohibits imports of solid wastes, and the country aimed to replace the importation of other wastes with its own domestically recycled resources by 2019 (Xia 2019, 1132). According to the State Council, the ultimate goal of the foreign ban is to protect the natural environment and human health, as well as to "increase domestic recycling and boost self-sufficiency in the demand for recycled materials" (Xia 2019, 1136). Essentially, China is attempting to upgrade its economy and deal with its surge in domestic garbage more effectively (UN Environment Programme 2018).

The strict enforcement of the foreign waste ban has reverberated around the world. Scientists estimate that globally 111 million metric tons of plastic waste will be displaced by 2030 as the result of the Chinese ban (Brooks, Wang, and Jambeck 2018, 1). On the one hand, it is a wake-up call for more efforts by developed nations as major waste exporters to improve waste reduction and recycling facilities. On the other hand, waste shipping to new destinations such as Southeast Asia and Africa may undermine these efforts (Xia 2019, 1158). No matter where plastic trash is sent, 80 percent of it will end up in landfills and ocean (Brooks, Wang, and Jambeck 2018, 1). In other words, the earth is waste's final destination.

If we humans regard the earth as the material world surrounding us, and view ourselves anthropocentrically, as outsiders from the earth, we are more likely

to think of the earth as a repository of resources and a depository for waste in the pursuance of human interests. The tremendous generation of post-consumer waste exemplifies this anthropocentric approach—taking the earth exclusively for human use, sometimes without even realizing that we are taking it for granted. We are turning the earth into a plastic planet, if we do not change our throwaway habits and anthropocentric perception of the earth.

What is the future of waste? Guardian journalist Oliver Blach (2015) suggests five things to aim for by 2025. First, the linear make-use-dispose model should be replaced by circular rethink—turning waste to valuable resources to manufacturers; the second is to transform waste into energy by means of new thermal and biological technologies; ratcheting up the recyclability of materials is the third goal; public attitudes to waste also require change, which might be brought about by charging consumers for food waste; lastly, retailers should take responsibility for recycling of post-consumer packaging (Balch 2015). Dealing with global waste crisis requires great efforts. We still have a long, tough journey ahead.

| Yuzhi Zhou |


高价回收
堆土处危险
严禁站人

YAO LU

姚璐

***Autumn Mountains in the Distance* 秋嶺遠眺圖** . 2008

***Thatched Hut in the Summer Mountains* 夏山草堂圖** . 2008

***Passing Spring at the Ancient Dock* 行春古渡圖** . 2006.

Autumn Mist in Mountains and Streams 溪山秋霭图 . 2007.


堆土处危险
严禁站人

Passing Spring at the Ancient Dock
行春古渡圖

As you move towards Yao Lu's *Passing Spring at the Ancient Dock*, a majestic contour of mountains and a meandering river enshrouded in mist floats into view. A fluid sense of depth and distance between you and the landscape is enhanced by the composition of the primary subject—mineral green mountains, ranging in size from foreground to background. The misty river twining around them serves as a gateway to the farthest mountain that recedes behind dense, drifting fog. In the foreground, a solitary boat sits on the riverbank, and three other boats depicted as if miniature drift down the centre of the waterway, creating a picture of tranquility. The interconnection between mountain and water is enhanced by a narrow white waterfall that cascades down a cliff on the right corner of the picture. A solitary pavilion on the top of one mountain reveals humans' trace in the realm of the spiritual, as the mountain has been regarded as a holy retreat for men in quest of immortality and a pure spirit since ancient times. *Passing Spring at the Ancient Dock* bears a remarkable resemblance to a Southern Song (1127–1179) blue and green landscape painting—*Waiting for the Ferry*—in both compositional and poetic setting, and more specifically, the subtle use of mountain, water, and other motifs to create a sense of timeless harmony and beauty.

When you step closer to Yao's work and attempt to ascertain further details, astonishingly, what you discover is that the landscape is not composed of verdant green mountains, but rather discarded

Yao Lu 姚璐 ,
***Passing Spring at the Ancient Dock* 行春古渡圖** . 2006.
Chromogenic print, dimensions variable.
(OPPOSITE PAGE)

Anonymous, ***Waiting for the Ferry*** **待渡圖** . Southern Song, thirteenth century.
Fan mounted as album leaf. Ink and colour on silk; 23.8 x 25.2 cm.
Gift of Charles Lang Freer. Freer Gallery of Art. F1911.155b

Yao Lu 姚璐 ,
***Passing Spring at the Ancient Dock* 行春古渡圖** . 2006.
Chromogenic print, dimensions variable.

GARBAGE MOUNTAINS + EARTH

urban construction waste covered by green nylon netting scaled out of proportion. The river in the foreground is represented by uneven and muddy pavement with drying puddles. Four tiny figures wearing yellow helmets, walking at the bottom of the vast "garbage mountain" (*lajishan* 垃圾山), reveal a human presence in this landscape unexpectedly embellished by trash.

In fact, it is not an idyllic scene like an intimately sized Song fan, but a manipulated photograph composed of images of messy, disordered, and dusty construction sites in Beijing, a by-product of China's rapid urbanization. Just imagine yourself as the tiny figure standing in front of this massive garbage mountain, or landfill, in reality, where the air is filled with the overpowering stench of decomposing organic waste and toxic, acrid smoke from burning plastic trash on the site: What feelings do you have as you become a part of this "landscape?"

Historical landscape painting is seldom mere artistic depiction of the external world. Rather, it seeks to promote a conceptual perception of nature perfected, designating an ideal world that reflects harmonious unification of all entities. Unexpectedly, Yao visualizes that unsightly waste and beautifies it within an idealized framework of landscape painting. His artwork asks, should we treat waste, which is formed from nature by us, as part of nature—or as nature itself?

| Yuzhi Zhou |

Autumn Mist in Mountains and Streams
溪山秋霭图

Yao Lu has crafted a picture of idyllic nature composed from fragmented images of urban construction sites to communicate an urgent issue in China: the aftermath of demolition and relocation caused by the country's rapid urbanization. Scenes of rubble and debris piled high on city streets next to half-demolished brick walls are so familiar that they have become normalized in China today; Yao's artwork destabilizes that sense of familiarity by directing our gaze so that, from a distance, the landscape is pure and painterly, and mostly untouched by human presence. Only up close is the image revealed to be a photomontage of rubble and garbage.

Put differently, the pictured landscape is imaginary, perhaps even phantasmagoric, yet real. Ephemeral autumn mists encircle towering mountains. Where the wet air and winding streams meet, there is a seamless passage conveying an ambiance of mystery and ambiguity. A lone pavilion awaits. Life rendered through the humans, temple, and the solitary tree feels smaller and inconsequential compared to the sweeping mountains and rivers. There is something sublime about them.

Focusing more closely, the compositional elements subtly contort to a reality of filth. Even then, it is hard to unsee the beauty. But, in fact, the mountains turn out to be protective netted coverings over collapsed wooden structures (the coverings are used at construction sites to prevent dust, asbestos, and other hazardous materials from rising up into the air). The rubble at the foot of the mountains

Yao Lu 姚璐 ,
***Autumn Mist in Mountains and Streams* 溪山秋霭图**. 2007.
Chromogenic print, dimensions variable.

once was a building marked with the Chinese character *chai* (拆)— a verb meaning to demolish or dismantle, often painted on buildings planned for demolition, a symbol of the radical transformation of cities. As the most readable symbol on the broken structure, it marks the remains of something unknown, only speculated. A mark of a disappeared history.

Yao Lu's photographs often and rightly are compared with twelfth-century Song-dynasty brush-and-ink fan paintings. Their beauty depends upon that comparison, to some extent. But there's more to them. This particular picture, in dark greys and dirty whites, also has analogues in slick black-and-white photomontages of the modern city featured in 1930s commercial magazines such as *Modern Sketch* (*Shidai manhua* 时代漫画) or *The Young Companion* (*Liangyou* 良友). Take, for instance, the montage *An Ordinary Shanghai Landscape* (*Pingfan de Shanghai fengjing*), where Mount Fuji is the

***An Ordinary Shanghai Landscape (Pingfan de Shanghai fengjing)* 平凡的上海风景** .
Modern Sketch (*Shidai manhua* 时代漫画), 1936.

backdrop for the city of Shanghai. The image emanates tensions and destabilization felt from the looming threat of Japanese colonialism. By juxtaposing a national symbol of Japan against the thriving waterfront, the montage embodies shadows of Shanghai's anxiety that are, in some respects, akin to Yao's assemblage of debris. Both unveil the psychological discomfort of living within a fragmenting, kaleidoscopic city space.

Yao Lu's photography practice thus works complexly—through an aesthetic of fragmentation that has long-lived roots in China's urban visual culture, and a cut-and-paste picturing process that itself can be indexed to the real fragmentation of the cityscape undergoing demolition and construction. By working with "beauty" and cultural essentializations of nature from early history as well, he creates a strange space in his artwork for the viewer to feel estrangement and distance—from the present "normal" cityscape—and from those images of perfected nature from the deep past.

| Nicole Chik |

Mining

METAL 金

The terrible mythological vision of the *Behemoth*—awesome in its strength as it gorges on mountains, its sinews made of stone, bones of iron—takes on disturbing reality in a film of the same name about coal mining by the independent filmmaker and artist Zhao Liang (2015). The camera takes us into coal mines in Inner Mongolia, iron smelting yards, homes of miners, a hospital where black lung is treated, and a ghost city. Loosely structured around the spaces of hell, purgatory, and paradise, and glossed with words drawn from Dante, the filmmaker reflects on ways of seeing the fragility and connectedness of the human body to its environment when that environment, mirroring the *Behemoth*, is violent and dangerous. Though perhaps it would be more to the point to say that the filmmaker grieves over his subject.

This is no ordinary documentary. The first minutes of the film do not establish a linear narrative moving forward fact by fact. Rather, they establish a vertical interplay between surfaces and depths. An open pit mine explodes. The chords of Tuvan throat singing deeply echo as rock flies into the air. A figure carries a mirror on his back, its surface reflecting the split, barren stone around him, a "portrait of the dead." Digital manipulations fracture the screen image, in turn, into mirror-like shards.

In hell we closely follow the miners down into the pit and into their everyday life. Zhao casts the black inky valley that is their home against a fiery smelting plant powered by coal. At the mines, coal dust penetrates every pore; at the iron yards, glinting flecks of minerals slide over the reddened cheeks of the iron workers. Instead of the mirror on the miner's back, in the furnace's heat faces are covered in a mirror of sweat.

We also catch glimpses of ghosts: what the land and life was like before coal. Flocks of sheep tumble over piles of gravel. A shepherd rides his horse across grassy loess. And our own lost innocence is embodied in a clean naked body that huddles against the edge of the pit, vanishes, then reappears.

From hell we follow the path of the coal transport trucks into a city. In this second section, the purgatory at the hospital, the sound of truck exhaust intermingles with the rasping breath of the patients. Inky liquid is drained from their chests to ease the pressure on their struggling lungs. Our final view of purgatory is a picture of miners from Sichuan sitting outside the hospital in silent protest of government policy about the fatal black lung disease.

At the end of the film we enter into a sunshine-yellow paradise. It is empty except for a few people walking along perfectly swept roads. The mirror one carries on his back reflects the steel girders of the unoccupied high-rises around him, and for a fleeting moment, the figure of a miner. Again, we hear the chords of Tuvan singing. The *Behemoth* is nearly invisible in the pristine surfaces of the vacant city, yet its dark presence can be perceived, and deeply felt.

Zhao Liang's reflections in this film on who or what the *Behemoth* is and where it can be glimpsed are the source of his video installation featured as part of the metal phase of *ecoArt China*, alongside delicate papercuts of power plants and automobiles by Bovey Lee. Both artists both dwell in direct and indirect ways on different aspects of environmental damage caused through mining the land for coal, minerals, and extracting it for oil, and the human desires and blindnesses that allow this damage to continue today.

Let's return to coal mining as an example. Coal has been used in China for centuries to fuel stoves and warm homes. When the Venetian Marco Polo journeyed to China around 1300, he found that "Throughout this province [of northern China] there is found a sort of black stone, which they dig out of the mountains, where it runs in veins. When lighted, it burns like charcoal, and retains fire better than wood; insomuch that it may be preserved during the night, and in the morning be found still burning" (Benedetto 2004, 160).

Western and especially northern China are rich in the "black stone;" massively scaled sites in the provinces of Shanxi, Shaanxi, Ningxia, Henan, as well as Inner Mongolia, are sources of 65 percent of the coal mined in the north. As an early socialist-era children's textbook hyperbolically put it, there is enough coal in northern China to supply the world for a thousand years (Wang 1951, 23). According to a 2017 government report, 5.9 million tonnes are mined each year (Zhongguo dizhi diaochaju 2017). As of 2020, coal accounts for 58 percent of China's energy consumption and 66 percent of its electricity generation (Normille 2020). And coal is not only sourced for industrial production. Homes in rural areas, especially, still depend on the coal-burning stoves described by Marco Polo.

The impact of coal dependency on the climate, environment, and human life is severe and hard to disentangle, for ecosystems function through continuing and fluid interaction; one disturbance is amplified in echo effects throughout. Take the example of plant life. Soil compaction caused by the massive machinery moving around a mined landscape limits the growth of plant life. Rice and tea, two of the plants that most easily absorb the heavy metals leaching from

polluted air into the soil and water by coal burning, effectively poison all that consume them (Schwalfenberg, Genius, and Rodushkin 2013; "Bad Earth" 2017). And those toxins move around the globe as well: studies at Pacific Coast climate monitoring and diagnostic labs have found those same heavy metals produced by coal burning in China in the air, and by extension, they impact local plant life (Liang et al. 2004).

Historically, the METAL phase was thought to generate the water phase (think of droplets of water cooling on the surface of heated iron) and to restrict the wood phase (an axe cutting down a tree, or equally to the point, the damage caused to plant life described above). The artworks featured here ask us to think hard on the nature of our own role in these phases of generation and restriction, to see ourselves as but one point—a critically important one—in ecological systems.

| Lisa Claypool |

ZHAO LIANG

赵亮

Zhao Liang 赵亮 ,
***Black Face White Face* 黑脸白脸** . 2013.
Three channel video installation, video in colour, HD 16:9, 10 mins.

Black Face White Face 黑脸白脸 1

As I watched Zhao Liang's *Black Face White Face* video installation for the first time, it took surprisingly long for me to realize that I was not observing stills but images in motion.

Three men on three screens engage with the camera so quietly that it almost looks like each figure is actually a photographed portrait. However, flickers of facial movements just below masks of caked coal dust and white lime and an intermittent wind that stirs dusty hair asks for deeper attention to how each screen discloses and conceals a person.

The miners' dusty faces stand out against the clean blue sky behind them. It is as if the pollutants have become their skin. The coal and lime ash cover every inch, embedding into their wrinkles, carving out their faces, powdering their hair. The uncommunicative back of the head of the central man is as obscure as those facing us.

With every breath they take in, they inhale the toxic dust into their bodies.

There is a rhythmic breathing sound in the background, hard and deep when breathing in, but short and quick during its release. Who is breathing?
It feels as though that person is struggling to get enough oxygen. Sounds of the working machines and the blowing wind are also heard in the background.

Two miners stare ahead with no facial expressions, blinking their shaded eyes. What are they looking at? We wait for the third miner to turn around, but he never does.

My vision is overwhelmed as I watch the three miners, waiting for their next movements. But, I am disappointed. My anticipation crumbles to nothing. All of the waiting is in vain. It leads to no answers. At the same time, it makes me more curious about the faces hidden behind this two-dimensional screen.

I also feel slightly relieved. By not being able to see their faces clearly, I am absolved of the responsibility of trying to decipher whatever uncertainties or secrets they may be carrying. Without the covering of dust and minerals, what are their faces like?

And I feel anxious. The long stares and the lack of signs to help identify their moods make me more eager to watch for longer. I want to know what they are thinking about and feeling, what is hidden behind their concealed faces. The longer I stare, the more curious I become, the more my curiosity grows, the more anxious I feel. The longer I stare, the less I know.

| Ziwei Cynthia Wang |

Zhao Liang 赵亮 ,
***Black Face White Face* 黑脸白脸** . 2013.
Three channel video installation, video in colour, HD 16:9, 10 mins.

Black Face White Face 黑脸白脸 2

Hazy blue mountains and rocky red dirt. The drifting fog creates the only motion in this barren and lifeless landscape. At first, the mining site seems abandoned, devoid of people, until you notice something small and fragile hiding inside each one of the screen images: a naked male body in a fetal position, resting on the rocks. It lies there, motionless, stripped of any protection. It may be hard to see it, since the body is always positioned to the side of the camera frame, on the bottom or in a corner. But unlike its surroundings, it is clean and smooth. You wonder how long it has been there, lying still, with the cold dusty breeze against its back. But is this body truly powerless against the environment?

In this piece, Zhao Liang portrays the body not only as powerless, but as a representation of the force that led to the destruction of the landscape it occupies. This duality—the fragility of the naked flesh, the strength of man to dig holes and remove mountaintops—defines the complexity of the relationship between humans and landscape. By placing the figure on the outskirts of the mined pit, Zhao Liang brings attention first to the space, to its vastness and multilayers of sediments built over thousands of years, its dull but saturated blues, reds, and yellows. Once the body is found, it acts as a subtle but shocking reminder of the insignificant size of a person in comparison to the magnitude of the landscape. Yet, that same body, though portrayed as vulnerable, has shaped the landscape beyond repair.

Violence is the process of forcefully removing someone or something from their desired or ideal state and it goes beyond physical control. That is, violence exists beyond an intentional act; it is present when it is felt. In Zhao Liang's work, violence describes the relationship between the pictured land and body, where both have been visually stripped and exposed by each other. Elements of violence in the landscape include the unnatural, thick smoke leaving the ground (possibly from a mining explosion), as well as the lack of vegetation, and human disturbances to the landscape such as buildings and roads. These are typical to mining sites, where the goal is extraction through destruction.

Elements of violence to the body, in this work, are not only implied in physical force but also in emotional vulnerability. The position the body takes shows defencelessness, as if it had been kicked to the ground or cast aside. It speaks to the violence the body feels as a response to the mine, alluding to both an emotional reaction to the barren land as well as the impact of the hard labour miners endure in order to conquer the land.

In Zhao Liang's work, both body and landscape are portrayed are subjects to each other's force. Both are passive and active agents in each other's demise.

| Nina Barroso Ramos |

photo credit: Photo courtesy Facebook AIR Programs

BOVEY LEE

李宝怡

Rake 耙—高速公路上的秋叶

A lacy fabric stretched over an oval embroidery frame would seem to be a fitting description of Bovey Lee's *Rake*. That, however, is only an initial assessment. The simple medium of a single sheet of Chinese *xuan* paper delicately cut to reveal shadows and shapes encourages a slower eye and arouses curiosity.

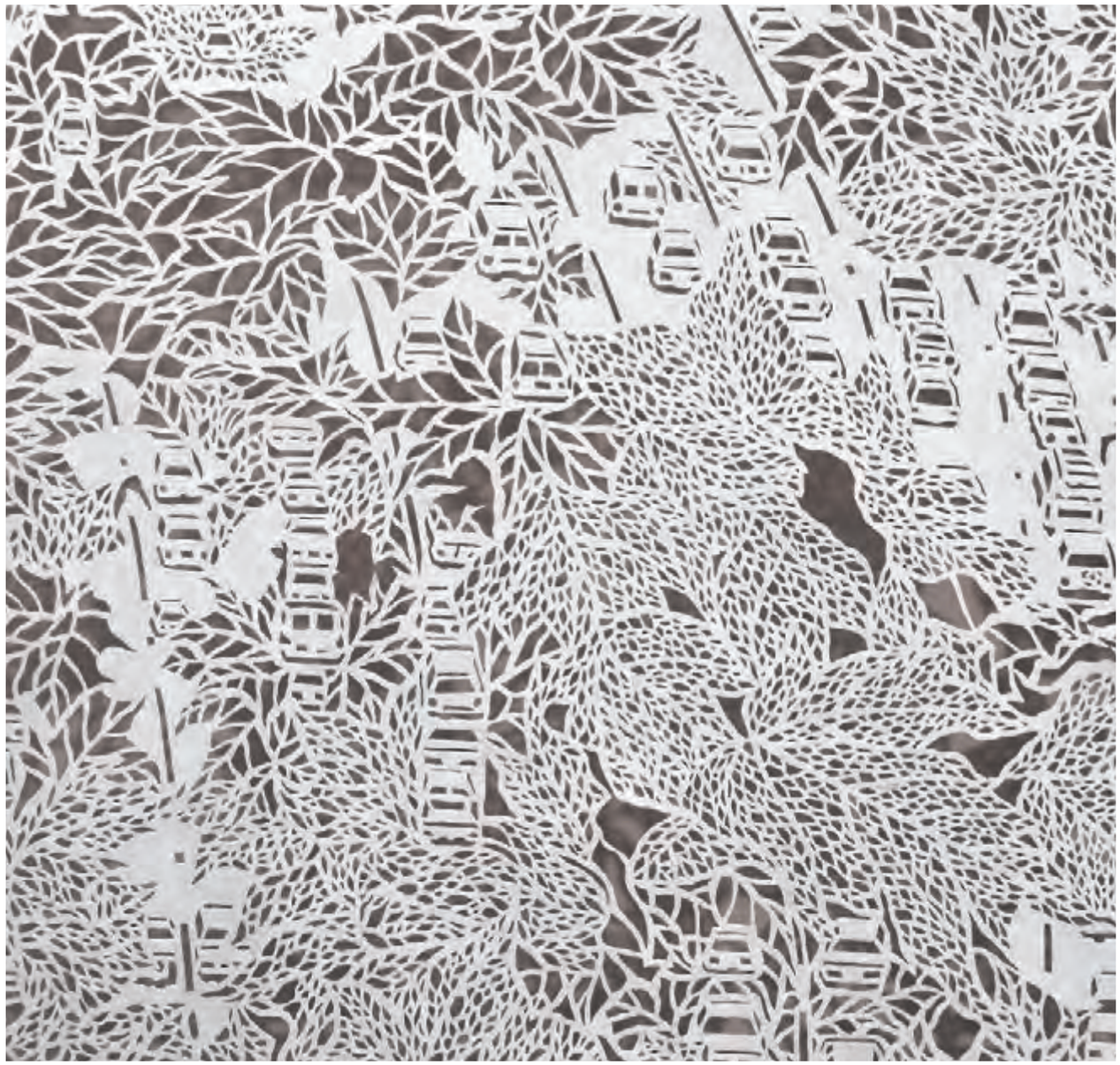
The work quietly reveals itself.

The paper is cut so that patterns of leaves are spread asymmetrically like a twisting mesh through which automobiles of various sizes can be glimpsed. Vehicles emitting a suite of pollutants take up every available space on the roads.

The shape of the paper has an ominous symbolism. It is the same as an egg, a cracking egg, about to hatch. We might wonder, what happens when the egg cracks and the automobile emissions are released? What will be the effect on public health and ecological integrity?

The seeming simplicity of the work dissolves the longer you look at it.Closer attention shows that the busy urban world—the cars on the road—seems to be protected by the plants high above it. Then again, the foliage looks a little like gift wrap—where the cars are the gifts.

Bovey Lee 李宝怡 ,
***Rake* 耙—高速公路上的秋叶** . 2014.
Cut paper. Chinese *xuan* paper; 61 x 52.1 cm.



Bovey Lee 李宝怡 , ***Rake* 耙—高速公路上的秋叶** . 2014. (DETAIL)

What does the title *Rake* mean? Does Lee refer to *Rake* as the action of gathering leaves, to the lines in the soil from using a rake repeated in the lines on the highway? Or does it mean to search for something the way police might rake through a crime scene for clues, or how one might rake through a messy desk to find a pencil?

The mounting of the paper above grey silk further invites participation and engagement with the artwork by way of the imagination. Herein lies an affective ambiguity. Lee showcases a play of light that creates a flattering and beautiful contrast between black and white, light and shadow, giving the paper a sculptural feel. The shadows arouse a desire to explore what might not be easily understood. The shadows leave room for the emergence of a boundless and formless presence. With the play of light and shadow, one can infer that this work perhaps hinges on the ancient Chinese concept of *yin* and *yang*, which means a dark side and a bright side. In Rake, both sides—the light and shadow—depend on each other to create a balance.

Rake compels me to infer answers to my questions from the object itself—to think about cut paper as an expression of how much humans have cut out of our environment. Yet Rake's power rests on the tension of the medium's fragility with its tensile interconnectivity—the fragile material of the cut paper portrays connected elements, people and place, nature and people.

| Diana Ohiozebau |

Bovey Lee 李宝怡 ,
***Power Plant—The Butterfly Dream* 核电厂—梦蝶** . 2008.
Cut paper. Chinese *xuan* paper; 128.9 x 90.8 cm. (TOP)
(DETAIL ON THE OPPOSITE PAGE)

Power Plant—The Butterfly Dream
核电厂—梦蝶

Everything required from beginning to end, she grasps within her hands. With an image alive in her mind, she picks up the thin polished knife. Holding the delicate material in one hand and the knife in the other, she slides the blade through the velvety paper. Images emerge from within as unbroken spheres flutter to the ground like soft petals while crescents and triangular disks materialize with each attentive cut. Each elegant marking creates curvatures of recognizable shapes and empty spaces. She lowers the carving tool and elevates her creation, allowing the sunlight to trickle through it. The doily-like embroidery hangs from her hand: a "window flower" (*chuanghua* 窗花). She raises her hand to steady the quivering sheet while inspecting the permanent impressions she has made in the paper.

This solitary moment threads a lineage of unnamed female artisans from China: journeying from a lonely concubine passing time within the walls of the Forbidden City, to a joyful mother-in-law carving out auspicious wishes for her son's wedding, to a young farm girl practicing this newly learnt skill with her mother. Today, one of their successors sits inside her sunlit studio in Los Angeles, engraving new meanings into these past legacies; presenting juxtapositions of the fantastic and familiar, strength and fragility, delicate human-made power and the silent endurance of nature.

Bovey Lee presents nature as a modern fantasy. A single sheet of translucent white paper lies on the surface of a silk grey backdrop. The subtle elevation of the paper is suggested by the soft shadow slightly right of the patterns. The upper fraction of the piece is made up of various manufactured objects complemented with

elements traditionally tied to nature. Butterflies, parachutes, lightning bolts, birds, tattered nets, and missiles embroider the dream-like piece much like a cloud brewing in a silent storm.

Spellbound by confusion, one is drawn to the unified, decorative appeal of Lee's work. Slender, florid clouds seem to hold up the entire ensemble; the eye is drawn into the complex designs and the mind tries to identify what it can. A symmetrical bridge is perched at the top of the power plant alongside the silhouette of a human figure. Splotches across the body suggest the presence of an infectious wound. An exotic bird, the residue of a prehistoric paradise, hovers over the body like a vulture awaiting the death of its prey.

The human story is a never-ending, relentless quest for more. Fading butterflies and clouds demonstrate humanity's view of nature's fragility. A power plant towers over the various buildings below in a demonstration of human strength: a frail pride built upon the fantasies of our stone fortresses. Lee's power plant is erected upon such ambitions, the recreation of another Tower of Babel. A well-known tale is echoed here, one where humankind's arrogance to reach the heavens ultimately results in our own downfall. Our generation is one disenchanted by the thought of Edenic times, yet such an idea still captivates our imaginations while conflicting with our desires for taller towers of dominance.

| Yoyo Siul |

Bovey Lee 李宝怡
***Roots—Dandelions* 根—蒲公英** . 2016
Cut paper. Chinese *xuan* paper on silk;
90.17 x 63.5 cm.

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COLOPHON

This project was born on a street corner in Shanghai. Above my head, propaganda in the medium of a digital signboard transformed the somatic city—its walls of cacophonous sound, the surging press of bodies moving along the sidewalks, the taste of car exhaust in the air, the stink of garbage piled at street curbs—into abstract brush-and-ink images. Like encroaching clouds of air pollution, electronically generated waves of ink gradually darkened the painted image. Their message: protect the state, advance science, and (perhaps unexpectedly, through the five-year plan of the mid-2010s) "co-build harmonious tax collection." Not only the landscape and cityscape but the environmental crisis itself—rendered as a "national painting" (*guohua* 国画)—thus was transformed into a celebrated cultural heritage to insiders, and as perpetually exotic to outsiders.

This gave me pause. As someone as concerned with environmental crises in China as I am with those of my home country of Canada and elsewhere around the planet, how to respond? It seemed to me that if the visual holds any power within the current propaganda campaign to shape—and possibly limit—action for environmental justice, and to make clear the stakes of doing so, situating it within the contemporary art scene would be a good strategy to raise questions about the nature of that power.

Finding the artists to participate proved easy. Some were friends whose work I have been thinking about for years; others I had not yet met, but knew their work from teaching it or seeing it in exhibitions. What marks them as a group is that they engage in practices of seeing that are connective, ductile, and boundary-crossing,

moving across and dwelling within diverse ecologies of material knowledge, whether Song-dynasty paintings, textbook representations of the biophysical world, scientific digital imaging, or documentary film. They also are open to improvisation and alive to the work of pictures as imaginative mediators between language and living form. Like the artists themselves, the artworks in the exhibition—the photographs, paintings, video installation, *Maskbook*—travel inside China and out.

As is the case with the five elemental phases, they offer us one simple object lesson: through movement, connect. In an anthropological vein, echoing Tim Ingold, I propose that it is the artists' self-conscious movement into the natural environment that creates knowledge of a certain type: theirs is a knowledge in movement. Their styles of vision and thinking echo the moving real environment around them.

And through their artworks they challenge us—*all* of us—to join in that rhythm.

I would like to thank my students and co-curators for working on this project with such focus and enthusiasm. Special thanks to Han Li for her excellent work as a research assistant.

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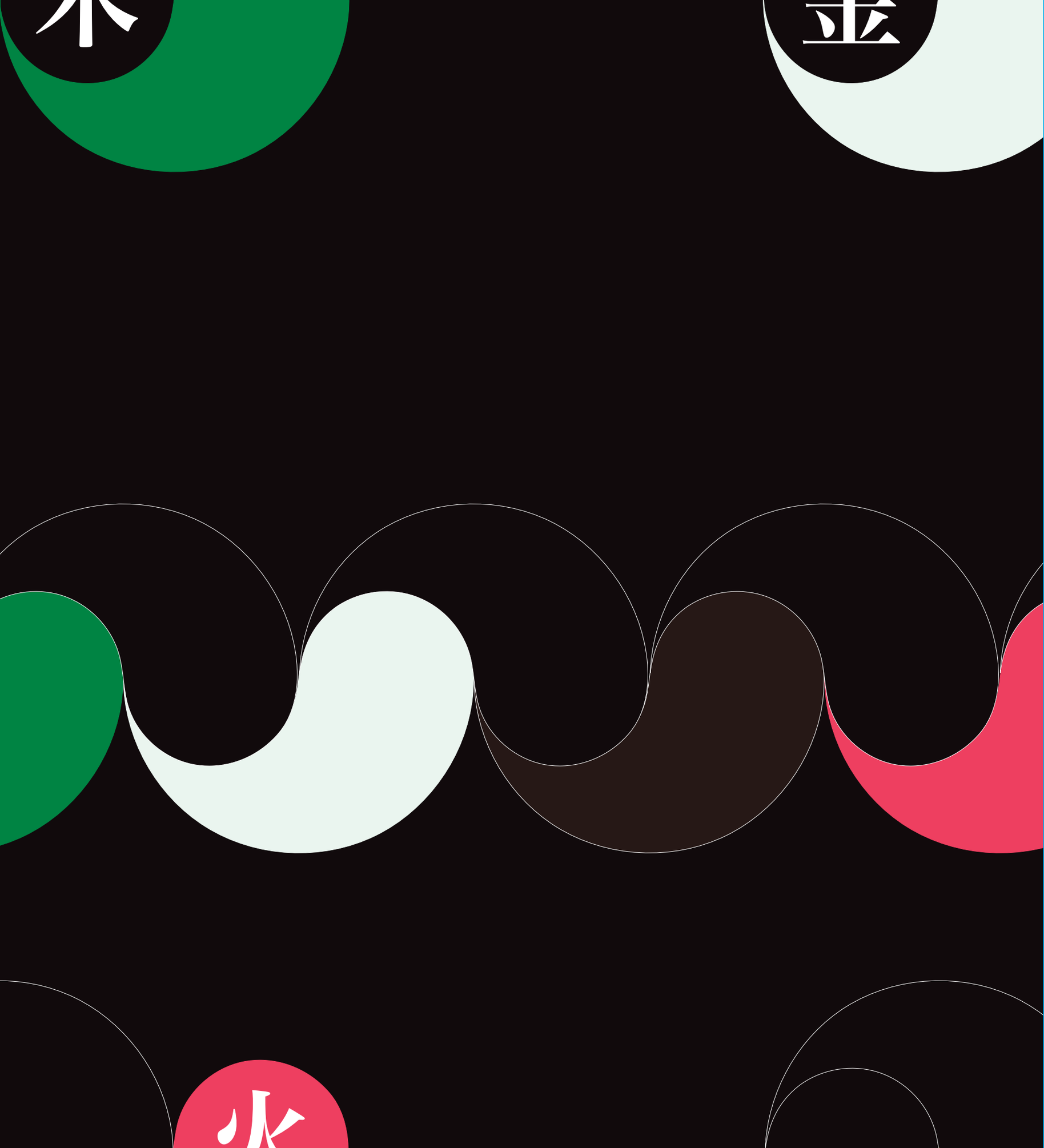
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