

PURE VIEWS: THE CHENGDU BIENNALE, 2011.

YANG WANG

Advertisements for the 2011 Chengdu Biennale blanketed the streets of the western Chinese host city, but when asked about the exact whereabouts of the venue, the East Chengdu Music Park, few locals had heard of the place. This was unsurprising once one learned that the park is a brand-new, corporately developed, 798/Moganshan-like “cultural district” with a musical slant. Located in the newly renovated Chengdu Red Ray Electric Tube Factory, the Music Park claims to be the world’s only music-themed entertainment destination housed in a renovated industrial complex. Departing from the modest beginnings of 798 and Moganshan, however, this 170,000-square-meter concrete complex already has as many cafes and shops as gallery spaces. The developers seem to follow the mantra: If you build it, they will come.

Periodic international art exhibitions, pioneered by the Venice Biennale, have continually brought recognition to their host cities. The Chinese city of Chengdu is solidly positioned as the western capital of contemporary China. Recognized by Chinese people as a laid-back yet modern city that has handled the country’s rapid growth with more grace than most, Chengdu does not yet fully register on the international scale. City leaders want to change that. Rich in ancient art history, boasting pre-Han-dynasty sites and the enigmatic Sanxingdui bronzes, Chengdu is also well endowed in natural resources and enjoys a thriving economy. The official poster for the biennale emphasizes the pristine, verdant beauty of Sichuan province. Despite an acknowledgement of environmental loss, the exhibition relays the overall message that at least in Chengdu, man and nature can and will continue to harmoniously co-exist, albeit with the help of human innovation and technology.

Curated by art historian and critic Lv Peng, the curator of the inaugural and now-defunct Guangzhou Biennale, the Chengdu Biennale is quite ambitious. Aided by the CCP Propaganda Bureau and seemingly coordinated with the PRC’s National Day, the fifth Chengdu Biennale is a multi-venue, three-part exhibition gathered under the theme of *Changing Vistas: Creative Duration*. This theme does not include several other simultaneous exhibitions scattered throughout the city, showcasing



folk art and theater. The three main sections of painting, design and architecture are held at the aforementioned Music Park and the nearby Industrial Civilization Museum. As the curatorial statement explains, the first part of the theme emphasizes the rapidly evolving Chengdu cityscape while the second part references Henri Bergson's use of "duration," which denotes psychological time, measured by the accumulation of memory rather than by empirical markers. The two-part theme tries to reconcile and ameliorate spatial and temporal disruptions created by economic development.

For the sake of brevity, this review focuses on visual art displays at the biennale, to which Lv gave the theme, *Pure Views*, inspired by Xia Gui's similarly titled Southern Song masterpiece. The exhibition, as the curatorial statement explains, aims to extract psychological depth from nature's physical forms. By designating a subject matter, the exhibition avoids the risk of disunity. What it lacks, in return, is a sense of imagination. Rather than engaging the philosophical underpinning of ink landscape, most of the works are fully realized landscapes or direct quotations from nature. Subdivided into three "platforms": Purity, the Remote, and Alternatives, the categories relate to Xia Gui's inscription but are only vaguely explained.

One of the few exceptions to the literal interpretations of the theme include Odani Motohiko's slow-motion video of gooey, blood-like bubbles floating horizontally from off screen toward a white screen. As the bubbles splash, one by one, against the pristine surface, their red pigment bursts and cakes into an unpredictable pattern. Without directly referencing landscape or even ink painting, the hypnotic video creates the temporal quality of viewing a long handscroll.

While the equal representation of emerging and established artists follows biennale standards, the presentation of new works by big names like Wang Guangyi, Yue Minjun and Mao Xuhui in the unexpected context of "landscape" leaves one to ponder the curatorial process. In addition, a handful of non-Chinese artists, mostly Japanese, comprised the small international component. Even though the wall labels noticeably leave out artist nationalities, the limited international representation gives



Odani Motohiko, *No. 44*, video installation, 2010.



Mao Xuhui, *Fallen Chair and Dewatered River*, oil on canvas, 2011.

the impression of a tentatively and conservatively explored theme.

The exhibition doesn't offer much new to followers of contemporary art, but judging from the official estimation of 250,000 visitors since the opening, the vast majority of them local, the biennale should be applauded for its outreach. Despite its mysterious location, free admission and extended exhibition dates have made contemporary art accessible to a broad, general audience.



Lee Leenam, *Walk Up and Down*, video installation (detail), 2011.

During my weekday visit, groups of school children pushed past their subdued adult chaperones to poke, point and gawk at the art. "They call this painting?", a girl asked skeptically and rhetorically as she examined Lee Leenam's video piece, *Walk Up and Down*, an overly literal translation of Fan Kuan's Northern Song masterpiece, which is more commonly translated as *Travelers Amidst Rivers and Streams*. Lee envisions the original, imaginary landscape as a real place whose tranquility is inevitably destroyed

by human settlement. In the final act, a giddy-looking Muammar Gaddafi descends down the screen on a parachute. Like many of the works in the art section, Lee's work contemplates landscape as a metaphor for the human condition. The pollution of an iconic image perhaps only emphasizes the impracticality of an idealized past.

Hans Op de Beeck, a favorite guest in China, offers a counterpoint in *Staging Silence*, a series of black-and-white videos that show human hands quickly and effortlessly erecting miniature models of city blocks. In Op de Beeck's world, cities are growing fast and our memories of them conflate into tightly packaged generalizations. On a mission, the organizers of the biennale seem to walk the line between generic and esoteric in making an earnest effort to stay focused on the present if not future aspirations of a maturing event and city.

Yang Wang is Ph.D. candidate in History of Art at Ohio State University, specializing in modern and contemporary Chinese art and visual culture. She is currently conducting her dissertation research on regional ink painting movements in the People's Republic of China.