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Yang Fudong: Estranged Paradise, Works 1993–2013

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Review

Yang Fudong: Estranged Paradise, Works 1993–2013

By John Zarobell

October 2, 2013

On View

UC Berkeley Art Museum

August 21 - December 9, 2013

I never knew I wanted to be in a 1930s Chinese film until I saw Yang Fudong's current exhibition at the UC Berkeley Art Museum. Walking into the seven-screen video installation, *The Fifth Night (Rehearsal)* (2010), I was transfixed. The films, all seven of which were shot at one time in black-and-white film, feature a host of characters in period costume wandering expectantly around an archetypal urban setting from the Golden Era of 1930s Shanghai film. The projection of these various preproduction shots muddles the brain in such a way as to prompt the active participation of the viewer in making the images cohere. The very process of reception and interpretation makes the experience of viewing an act of production in the mind's eye—a narrative that I now play back as I write this article.



Yang Fudong. *The Evergreen Nature of Romantic Stories*, 1999; chromogenic print; 34.65 x 47.24 in. Courtesy of the Artist, Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris/New York, and ShanghART Gallery, Shanghai.

Alongside multichannel installations, this exhibition features a number of single-channel videos, large-scale photographs, and an accompanying film series at the Pacific Film Archive that included Yang's first feature-length film, *Estranged Paradise*, and a series of historical Chinese films selected by Yang. The panorama of his work and influences make for an exceptional midcareer survey of this prominent Shanghai-based artist. The exhibition is thematically united by the subject of Yang's own lost generation of urban Chinese youths, seduced by the materialistic opportunities now within reach, a result of China's changing role in the global economy, and filled with ambition. As a Generation X-er myself, I empathize with the slacker impulse of the protagonist in Yang's first feature, but Yang brings eloquence, complexity, and historical context to images of a generation trapped between delusions of grandeur and the real limitations of a particular historical moment. Yang argues for a way of living as much as a way of making art; despite the surface glitz in some of his photographic work and the mad pace of economic development in China, he seems to advocate for a life lived with leisure and a kind of integrity.

Yang Fudong. *Don't Worry. It Will Be Better*, 2000; chromogenic print; 35.43 x 49.21 in. Courtesy of the Artist, Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris/New York, and ShanghART Gallery, Shanghai.

This moral dimension is intentionally oblique, making it difficult to perceive. The artist is as tongue-in-cheek as he is skillful, and his ability to create a sleek, sexy image is as developed as his editing is conscientious and willfully obscure. His series of photographs *Don't Worry. It Will Be Better* (2000) is ironic pseudo-propaganda, but there is something deeply troubling about these images of groups of bright-eyed youths lounging around an urban apartment. The video installation *Tonight Moon* (2000) embeds around twenty small screens into a wall on which is projected a large video of swimmers at Suzhou Garden in Jiangsu province. A series of three video screens on each side of the viewer play loosely related imagery. The intertextuality of the piece is distracting, but it serves to complicate the careful aesthetic balance of the films' settings, and the artist's enigmatic intention draws the mind toward contemplation. Rather than glorifying the pursuit of ambition, Yang's work creates ambiguities, hinting at more compelling ways to satisfy our desires.



Yang Fudong. *An Estranged Paradise (mo sheng tian tang)*, 1997-2002 (digital still); 35mm black and white digital film transferred to DVD; 76 min. Courtesy of the Artist, Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris/New York, and ShanghART Gallery, Shanghai.

Estranged Paradise, Works 1993–2013 is on view at **UC Berkeley Art Museum**, in Berkeley, through December 9, 2013.

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