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YANG FUDONG

The Solace
of Beauty

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美的慰藉

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Yang Fudong: *The Solace of Beauty*

by Li Zhenhua (Winter 2015) [TRANSLATED]



Yang Fudong, *The Evergreen Nature of Romantic Stories (5)*, 1999.

LI ZHENHUA: Your work explores urbanized existence through film and photography. 1999 seemed to be a transition period for you. During this time you gradually moved away from the spirituality and individual experiences from your early performances.

YANG FUDONG: The photo series in Shanghai was mainly about life's transitions; after I graduated from university in 1995 I returned to Beijing. In 1997 I made my first film, *An Estranged Paradise*, which was completed in 2002 and premiered at Documenta 11). I had to move to Shanghai for economic reasons. At that moment, life's realities reminded me that I couldn't create every minute and every moment; I had to exist, to live. When I didn't have means to shoot a film, I just shot photos. This was not creating for the sake of itself, but to show the idea that could be completed by the image. *The Evergreen Nature of Romantic Stories* (1999) and *Don't worry, It will be better...* (2000) are about young people's choices and concerns. They were derived from the subtle interweaving feeling between the everyday and work. Just like the unknowable aspects of "youth" that were explored in *Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest*, the sense of young men and women having dreams and expectations was something I hoped to show in these photos. The three month duration of the performance *Other Where or Stranger's Plan* taught me to believe, it supported me in moving forward. In *The Evergreen Nature of Romantic Stories* (1999), both the beautiful (unreal) bonsai and the young man and woman observing it intensely, have an artificial longing and beauty to them. The *Don't worry, It will be better...* (2000) series is also about life's longings and expectations; sentiments are created through the boys' and girls' movements in the room and their gaze out of the window. Like when you go to a friend's place, and you pace around and look out of the window in a moment of boredom, it might be due to some inexplicable anticipation and emotional disturbance. Some friends have said that they think these works are like an advertisement for these emotions. I don't agree, it resembles meditation more. It's an experience where the inner longings are very close to your eyes. It exists, but is blurry; similar to people in everyday life focusing on what's in the distance, but not what lies in front of them.

LZ: *Don't worry, It will be better...* and *The First Intellectual* (2000) are your only works with text placed onto the photo. Why are the texts in both of these works in English?

YF: To put it simply, the words are visible, but also invisible, they are in the details of many photos, similar to reading quietly (in meditation). English is rather simple and pretty, my English is not good, but I feel a strange kinship with those letters and foreign expressions. It is also an externalization of meaning from the Chinese, it conveys a subtle or strange emotion that cannot be felt.



Yang Fudong, *Lock Again*, 2004.

LZ: *Don't worry, It will be better...* and *The Evergreen Nature of Romantic Stories* can both be seen as reflecting the conditions of young people. Does *The First Intellectual* also address similar concerns?

YF: I wrote a description for this work: "An educated young person, who can be regarded as an intellectual or a cultivated person, was smashed by somebody with a brick on the street. He was helpless, unable to vent and unable to find a target, in a powerless state." There is a part of self-catharsis, but also a sense of helplessness to it. A state of self-anger that cannot be vented anywhere. Also a bit of black humor.

LZ: *Don't worry, It will be better...* and *The Evergreen Nature of Romantic Stories* were shot indoors. The gazing out of the window or the emotional relations or expectations between people all happen inside. The characters in *The First Intellectual* all appear in the middle of the street with buildings in the process of modernization clearly visible behind them. This kind of symbolism is obviously starting to appear in your images.

YF: The situations depicted in *The First Intellectual* are on the street or at intersections. Where does he want to smash the brick in his hand? There is no target, nor direction. I think shooting this work created some inadvertent thoughts.

LZ: Do you see a link between media and space? Space was completely conquered in *The Nightman Cometh* (2011) whereas in the photo series *International Hotel* (2010) there was an external space that existed independently. In order to see it, one had to explore and experience it through the photo's space; is there a link between media and space?

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YF: Is the mise-en-scène created by the author (artist) or is it interpreted by the audience? Both sides are free and cannot be forced. If there is an interactive and cooperative relationship between space and image, the spectator can be the second director. The ideal effect the artist wants to present can only be achieved by the unforeseen, created by the audience's involvement with their strong self-awareness and interpretation. Seeing a filmic or photographic work, the spectator will often edit his own brief interpretation. Every spectator is a director. Everyone's understanding is also not the same.

LZ: Why did you choose a classical format? Most of your photographic works maintained a width of about one meter, why did you choose this format, is this related to your needs?

YF: I did not deliberately limit my works to this format. It was because in the past ten years, most of my photographic works were shot digitally. There are limitations on the quality of digital photography—of course, the images can also be enlarged, but the pixels and the sharpness would be affected. Moreover, some images' character and feeling are best expressed through a 50 to 180 centimeter format, so there would be no need to enlarge it by force.

LZ: Do you think a lot about technique in your creations?

YF: It is very hard to say what real technique is. Is it just about the exactness of light exposure, or the accuracy of time and speed or the precision of an image composition? Or is it the concept of a work? Are those the techniques you are talking about?



Yang Fudong, *International Hotel No. 9*, 2010.

LZ: Everything you've just mentioned belongs to the field of analog photography, but there are already traces of Photoshop and design in the collage work and composition you did in *Forest Diary*, and also in the combination of text and image in *Don't worry, It will be better...* and *The First Intellectual*. Did the impact of these two aspects on photography change anything about your creations?

YF: My understanding and concept of photography is broad, encompassing both photos and film. Around 2000, I had already done some experiments in this field, like *Don't worry, It will be better...*, *The Evergreen Nature of Romantic Stories*, and *Breeze* (2000)— all narrative works that describe a mood or emotion. I think "technique" should be more about a concept's understanding. My understanding of ideal photography is more inclined towards cinematic photography— auteur photography. I always shoot with film, but very often technique is understood as special effects or post-production. I prefer precision in the preliminary stage. When I shoot a film, I try to do the preparation work well and don't rely on compensating afterwards. Post-production can help to accomplish many things, but the misconception is that it compensates for the short-comings and errors in pre-production.

LZ: This is also one of the characteristics for digital photography's popularity.

YF: I think technology is convenient, but not the best method. Even when a lot of people use post-production to make things up and don't create from the beginning, I think it is still not too late to remedy the situation. For my films, I don't many special techniques for editing —they are completed by straight cuts. I don't use Photoshop particularly often for my photographs. I insist on analog cameras for shooting films and videos. I have accepted the idea of digital photography cameras around the year 2000; their speed and real-time image processing is what I am interested in. With the advance of computers, the result can be seen immediately, you don't have to bear the risk of the whole photo developing process. Digital cameras are faster, easier and more efficient.

LZ: You didn't make any photographic work between 2000 and 2002. Was photography unimportant for you during this period? Seeing the set of *Backyard—Hey! Sun is rising* (2001) as a photograph, what do you think about the relation between photography and photographs of sets, video and film?

YF: There are not many photos left from that time. Until I shot *Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest, Part 1* (2003) I took only very few set photos. A film's main objective is not to keep a lot of documentation and material.

LZ: Is photography created separately?

YF: I changed my mind about this. I slowly learned that photos are also needed to document the creative process when you shoot film or participate in an exhibition. This helps to provide references for future exhibitions or to prepare for publications. I also began to realize the reality of photography as another form of media in my creations, as the market for video art is not very optimistic and the market is biased towards collecting photography. Photography can be seen as a sale of goods. This vague awareness started to turn into something that should be done seriously in a work. But I don't think too much about documentation and business. Also, is a form of set photography allowed to exist in my work?

LZ: This will create the problem of the emergence of another perspective.

YF: I don't really approve of keeping material or extra images produced for collection. As a photographic record of some moments during the filming process, the creation of some single-frame images cut into another perspective and another form of expression; it gives the spectator another possibility for interpretation. When I shot *Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest, Part 4* and *Part 5*, I consciously took many pictures in the style of set photos. Because we encountered different scenes, different people, and the film itself didn't have a script—only an idea of a narrative direction—the capturing and recording of single-frames might be seen as photography, but also a single-frame film of the *Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest series*.

LZ: You've spoken about this "single-frame film" or "extracted-frame film" in the past. "Single-frame film" is a way of filmic expression that provides a perspective. "Extracted-frame film" is connected to the film's context, but taken out, to use as a form of presentation in a publication. How should we understand the difference, or parallel state, between a "single-frame film" and the actual film's perspective?

YF: Taking a frame out of a complete film or an image out of a scene (as photo documentation) is an interception that changes many things. It has broken the inertia of a film's continuity; all characters and scenes existing in the film will serve this single-frame film (photo documentation). All the actor's actions, expressions and feelings no longer belong to the previous (or posterior) film, but only to this image. In a film in the style of set photography, all the scenes' and actors' real life transitions, including their states of mind, are changing. So what did it record? I think what is interesting, is not whether set photos should be taken, but to ask whether these images are still set photos. There are also movie misinterpretations. For example, Fellini's *8 1/2*. When I read about this movie in a film magazine what I saw in my mind was a movie made of text and the set photos in the publication. Did that constitute that movie? Regardless, the information that this article provided influenced my view of the film. Very often, a film or video work is also introduced through images. A lot of people never see a film but only learn about it through pictures. This probably doesn't fully describe a photographic film or the deviation from its accuracy.

LZ: Do you believe that textual films exist?

YF: Textual films will always exist, the states of being "out of context" that appear with them, are sporadic and incidental interventions. Sometimes reading a complete book is not as good as occasionally casting an eye over a couple of sentences or reading for two minutes on the toilet— perhaps this is even more interesting than finishing the whole book. Outtakes are more like text films, it leaves more to one's imagination; texts will directly lead to the emergence of a state of an "implicit film." Sometimes this kind of reading can be very dream-like. Sometimes people are very strange. When we see the reality, there might be some words that can't be conveyed or a feeling like something isn't in place.

LZ: What is imaginary, what is real? In *Minor Soldier YY's Summer (2003)* I was confused between the reality and imaginary of the diary.

YF: My thoughts were very simple back then, a 35mm film camera is just a photo camera that shoots continuously. When I press the shutter once, I get one photo, and if I press and hold, I get a photo series. From that moment on I could not separate photography from film.



Yang Fudong, *Shenjia alley. Fairy (1)*, 2000.

LZ: The only difference is the temporality.

YF: The process of shooting a film is just to stick successive single-frame photos together.

LZ: Your works discussed actual time in the beginning, while later an intertwinement of eras appeared, like the atmosphere of the Republican period with ancient costumes in *First Spring* (2010) or *The Nightman Cometh* (2011). What does temporality mean to you?

YF: Temporality reminds me of the idiom “Lord Ye's love for dragons,” which refers to professing love for what one really fears. Like the Republican impression in *No Snow on the Broken Bridge*, the figures are wearing cheongsams and long robes. I don't think it recreated the atmosphere of that time, but it is a performance by post-2000 youth in the dresses of people from fifty or eighty years ago. It is the situation of a play and not of that period. That is the interesting thing about images. Maybe something that is misunderstood will bring a different narrative, a confusion of time or an inadvertent disorder.