

Meng Huang – "And What do you Think? Landscapes"

A tiny, doubtful starting point onto the large, white canvas; then a restless patter of small, anxious, unceasingly adjusted brushstrokes follow one after another, covering one another, slowly coating the supporting framework in something that, from afar, might look like an oil slick inexorably expanding on clear water. Little by little, a chaotic forest of muddy signs outlines a tree, a wave, a bulrush. One by one, concealed elements of the artist's memory gradually come into sight, grow in visual and psychological impact, eventually turning into an extremely powerful and at the same time poetic landscape saturated with personal, social and cultural references.

Meng Huang (Beijing, 1966) is an enchanting storyteller enamoured with richly detailed subplots that he incessantly questions during the pictorial narration. Each of Meng's works recounts a fragment of an enthralling and conflictual tragedy wrapped in mystery: existence. Brought into being with an earthy palette including up to 18 hues of black, Meng Huang's landscapes are imbued with a strong symbolism and Romantic echoes. The artist's dreamy projections into Nature are expressed through the aesthetical beauty of the scenery, while the gloomy colours and the choice of specific venues/subjects relevant for their historical and/or cultural character reflect Meng's critical analysis of actual reality and the socio-political system of today's China.

Dam is a monumental landscape remarkable both in terms of concept and size (350 x 1760 cm, 8 panels each 350 x 220 cm). Similarly to a few other earlier works painted *en plain air* (e.g., *Landscape*, 2004, 400 x 220 cm or *08.10.2006-20.10.2006 - Hamburger Kunsthalle*, 2006, 200 x 400 cm), *Dam* is as well regarded by the artist both as a live painting performance – with reference to the outdoor painting process – and as an oil painting. For the completion of this work (April-July 2007), Meng Huang built a huge structure of scaffoldings on the dry river bed of the *Ru* River, Zhumadian Prefecture, Henan Province, and painted a 360° panorama of the surrounding area. The central focus of the painting is a view on the Banqiao Dam, a huge, controversial architectural structure erected in the early 50s, the infamous story of which the artist knows well as a result of growing up in the same province. It was August 8, 1975, when the Banqiao Dam and a string of 61 other smaller reservoirs downstream catastrophically failed, due to construction and engineering defects, after the unforeseen consequences of the devastating collision between the cold front of air coming from the north of the country and super Typhoon Nina. The death toll from the resulting tremendous flood was only declassified in 2005, having remained a state secret for over 30 years. According to the Hydrology Department of Henan Province, the victims for the flooding totaled ca. 26,000, while another 145,000 people died from the ensuing famine and epidemicsⁱ. Judged on the basis of a corresponding report by Human Rights Watch, the actual body count appears to be much higher than the official figure.ⁱⁱ Many of the dams that collapsed in 1975 have been newly rebuilt since then, included the Banqiao Dam in 1993. Meng Huang's *Dam* does not only keep the memory of a terrible catastrophe alive, but also casts a shadow on the even greater risks connected with an extremely ambitious man-made intervention on nature, the Three Gorges Dam (Sichuan Province), the largest hydro-electric station worldwide.

Landscape 2006 (400 x 220 cm) is the result of a different close encounter with the destructive power of nature. Planned as an *en plain air* painting representing the mountains surrounding Fenghuangling, Beijing, the painting was damaged by a violent storm that wiped out and snapped the massive wooden structure constructed as a supporting framework for the canvas.

By accepting the limitation of his human condition in the face the forces of nature, Meng Huang resolved to leave the work unfinished.

Differing from his earlier works belonging, for example, to the *Paradise Lost* series (1994-2001), Meng's recent landscapes show intimate close-ups of purely natural details, where the formerly usual presence of architectural structures (e.g., industrial buildings, factory smokestacks) has been totally excluded from the overall view. In the past few years, Meng Huang's growing interest in the beauty of transience - as well as for the transience of beauty - brought him to specifically observe and represent movable subjects such as clouds (*Clouds*, 2008, 220 x 400 cm), tree leaves or blades of grass swaying in the wind (*Sky*, 2007) and, above all, rippling water surfaces (*Water*, 2008, *Secret Pond N.4*, 2007). In Meng Huang's eyes, "the most unstable things are not completely real. If a landscape is too real, to me it somehow lacks beauty. Waters from a pond, a lake, a river, a ditch all have different appearances; therefore the psychological function they generate is different as well."ⁱⁱⁱ

Since 2001, Meng Huang has been painting a series of human landscapes titled *International Face*. In these works, once again, the artist topples the concept of the common aesthetical and perceptual sense. In most of his ca. 280 x 180 cm canvasses, Meng portrays the ever-transforming facial expressions of his favourite model, Jiang Zhenyu, thus revealing the emotional and psychological complexity of his old friend and neighbour who is afflicted by Down's Syndrome. Based on a Chinese popular saying, people suffering from this disease are called "international faces" (guoji lian), and this in relation to the similarity of their features independent of their nationality or ethnic group. In the current historical phase in which China is coursing at a hectic speed toward globalization, Meng Huang's *International Face* becomes an emblematic warning against the increasingly superficial standardisation of knowledge and the loss of cultural identity. Questioning the idea of so-called "normality", Meng Huang seemingly wants to let his subject tell the spectator: "If you want to have the same culture worldwide, then you too are mentally deficient."^{iv}

The questions Meng Huang puts forwards in his landscapes are not easy to be answered. "And what do you think?"^v

by Nataline Colonnello (箫岭)
Beijing, August 2008

ⁱ http://www.hnsl.gov.cn/look0/article.php?L_Type=1&id=297

ⁱⁱ <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1995/China1.htm>, February 1995, Vol. 7, No. 1, Human Rights Watch: "In the resulting floods, famine and health epidemics, fatalities amounted to anywhere between 86,000 (the government's internally-released figure) and 230,000 (an estimate produced by eight senior Chinese critics of the Three Gorges project)."

ⁱⁱⁱ Excerpt from an interview with Meng Huang held in his Beijing studio (Hebeicun village) on June 21, 2008.

^{iv} Excerpt from an interview with Meng Huang in his Beijing studio (Hebeicun village), February 16, 2005.

^v Jiang Zhenyu's incessant question to Meng Huang, excerpt of Meng Huang's interview to Jiang Zhenyu, Kaifeng, Henan Province, February 28, 2008.