

## MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

### An Interview on *The Nightman Cometh*

*On March 11-12, 2012, Yang Fudong and Li Zhenhua continued their ongoing discussion of the artist's recent work. Translated from Chinese by Ying Liu.*

**LZ** In order to discuss *The Nightman Cometh* with depth, we might want to start by talking about *The Fifth Night*. *The Fifth Night* is a multi-channel installation – a more concrete theatrical attempt built upon your previous *Dawn Mist, Separation Faith*, which created a fête-like viewing experience and also played with the idea of synchronization. However, *The Nightman Cometh* is different – we can almost see the shadow of your much earlier work, *Backyard – Hey! Sun is Rising*. Of course it is more theatrical, and the different time periods are intermixed. The snow scene, in particular, is almost horrifying due to its extreme quietness. Those spotted deer and the gliding eagle take the audience out of reality and into a space where historical references converge. So I would really like to know where you took your inspiration from, and how you account for returning to the short film format, as well as utilizing a fantasy-rooted style.

**YF** When a film focuses on space, it tends to emphasize the art of how to “be seen” in an exhibit. From *Dawn Mist, Separation Faith* (2009), to *The Fifth Night* (2010), to *One half of August* (2011), these are creations that were presented with such an intention embedded within the work, while *The Nightman Cometh* is apt to highlight the “disappearing” part of things by utilizing drawn sketches and random video documentation. As for the reason for returning to the short film format, it is because I hope to make “film paintings”, or so-called film “sketches” to metaphorically represent the imaginary space which results from the perception of an artwork. The footage recorded from a monitor that was attached to a shooting camera took place during the production, which supplements discussion and the viewing experience. In a similar case, *The Fifth Night, Part II* also contains lots of “preview” segments. The viewer might find it interesting to see traces of “previews,” and this is something I would like to keep working with in the future. Now come back to *The Nightman Cometh*, this 20-minute film – its narrative has something to do with what I refer to as “hint film” that we have discussed before. A kind of narrative that would hint at things in order to express what words cannot communicate. And how to represent it in an independent movie, with elements such as narrative-contained imageries, actors, sets, and even something literary? It became the focus of my experiments during the production. Even though *The Nightman Cometh* looks like a period piece, I would consider it as a “neorealistic” approach. A meditative one. And it is only the feeling in the film that has to do with “neorealism” because in fact it questions contemporary reality as well as societal ideology.

**LZ** You mentioned historical references, neorealism, as well as literary elements. So, what part of your experience drove you to shoot a baron in an ancient battlefield or an intellectual in post 1900s Shanghai, instead of setting it up with a contemporary cityscape as the backdrop, like what you did in *Backyard – Hey! Sun is Rising*?

**YF** *The Nightman Cometh* gives such an impression of an old classical narration, not so much by recounting historical events, but in how it depicts contemporary reality through

## MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

the lens of history. It brings up modern and current concerns through the subconscious by asking certain questions. There is a baron. There are characters and plotlines. There seems to be reenactment of stories or situations that took place hundreds of years ago, however, it makes no effort to recover history. Rather, its goal is to transport a sense of history and to create room for introspection into one's subconscious reality.

**LZ** As for you, does such reality truly exist?

**YE** It seems rather pointless to focus on whether such reality is the truth or whether the truth truly exists. In *The Nightman Cometh*, it is more crucial to pay attention when the soldier or warrior reaches a moment where he has to decide whether he should disappear or keep fighting when the night falls. Along with trying to retain his last hope, those things mean more to me than depicting "truth" or "reality."

**LZ** *The Nightman Cometh* is more than just a video art piece. Besides the cinematic space you created, you also incorporated paintings and footage recorded off the monitor. I wonder if you can elaborate on the relationship between image created on set and the set uncovered by the monitor. Remember how we briefly talked about using paintings and playback video during your production, and how it resembles the process of archeological discoveries? Such additions seem to inform what is captured in your images by adding elements of the present tense, which is also marked by the past tense. There are connections not only in terms of aesthetics and relativity, but also in terms of the time continuum.

**YE** By utilizing documentary footage, I hope to confuse the line between the set and reality and thus to create a sense of mistake (or departure from the principal part/element). Can it be counted as part of the film, for example, what appears on the monitor or rises from my subconsciousness during the shoot? How about the realistic documentary section? Does this constitute a "time film" segment in *The Nightman Cometh*?

**LZ** Can you talk about how your paintings function in relation to the whole setup of the piece?

**YE** Besides a short film, *The Nightman Cometh* also comprises eight oil paintings. The individuality of each of them is emphasized. Some stories in the whole piece are told through those images. That is also why I call them "sketch films," because they give a sense of incompleteness, and the rest of the "editing" is to be done in the viewer's consciousness. It is not unusual that film narrative is achieved through editing a series of shots into a sequence. So to some extent, the "montage" going from one painting to another can be more interesting, although they must be produced with the fundamental idea of film in mind, or say, under the direction of the "director." When I paint, I don't want to make something that is academic or absolutely painterly. What I care about more is to create a particular atmosphere and texture that has a handmade feel, as well as a narrative generated from painting-to-painting montage. The medium of oil on canvas or the quality of painterliness does not interest me much. The connections among those paintings could help render what I call "imagination film." The images that ended up in

## MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

the gallery were painted when the short was close to being completed. They make an alternative version of the film part of *The Nightman Cometh*.

LZ There are those animals and birds in the images you created. Besides references to relationships between human beings and animals in contemporary culture, I was wondering if it also implies certain intellectual spirits that exist in Chinese tradition. Take the scene with the woman and deer for example. It can be done in painting. But I imagine it being problematic to show the eagle gliding off in the same way immediately after its gaze meets a man. Such contrast does not only reveal technical advantages in video art, but also in a way reveals what painting is capable of. One of the most important parameters of action is time, yet it seems almost impossible to convey that in painting. I hope to hear you elaborate on the different states of time appearing in the human-animal relationships you depicted, and how those shifts and transitions were made from “painting time” (2D paintings) to “film time” (action captured on moving image), and vice versa. To me, both scenes above, the one with goddess and deer and the other with man and bird, share painterly qualities. But it seems that the moment of the latter could only be captured with a camera.

YE A lot of mediums and forms are applied in art making for the sake of expression. They seem drastically different but some may actually serve the same purpose. A film made by an artist is not a reason for being superior to other alternative means of expression. On the same token, something created by an artist doesn’t necessarily make it experimental. In *The Nightman Cometh*, eagle, deer and related scenes are symbolic and emotional. It was shot conventionally, as far as utilizing common film language and method of representation go, but it succeeds in bring life to objects. Even as an artist, I don’t shy away from standards or tradition. I don’t think they would make my work conservative. On the contrary, it is my way of conveying my ideas by taking advantage of them, and turning them into a foundation upon which my work could thrive. For example, the gliding eagle in *The Nightman Cometh*, is not merely a metaphor for impact, power and braveness, but it also signifies desolation. The deer family is loving, but where they are is cold and snowy, which foreshadows their miserable future with no food prospect. Such imagery also implies sadness. Communicating emotions through objects is not unusual in Chinese paintings history. Sometimes, applying familiar technique can be most effective in some cases.

Occasionally you would see films that have only one take that is also static. So why can’t the take be a physical painting that we call “painting film”? To explore the backstory in a painting is kind of like making out what’s inside or outside a film frame. In my experience with film, characters and animals are usually set up to serve some narrative functions. Man, woman or even ghosts inevitably carry some symbolic meanings; seeing deer may make you think about warmth and happiness, while struggle and fight might come to your mind as witnessing an eagle. Wild chicken or little birds on rocks are likely to bring back memory of some ancient paintings because they are common subjects for traditional Chinese painters.

LZ Animals in your work do make me think of traditional Chinese painting. But what is interesting is that you live in the modern time and received mostly western oil painting

## MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

education. So spiritually, when it comes to treating animals in your work, do you stand closer with the Chinese painting tradition or the western?

YE When I made a decision to include animals in *The Nightman Cometh*, what you were asking wasn't really my concern. It would have more to do with my background, experience, education and knowledge. For instance, I wouldn't raise the subject of the eagle to an academic level. I prefer it to remain on a universal level so that everyone can respond to some its qualities in some way: violence, sharpness, encouragement, generosity, solitude, tragedy, etc. Further, by placing it in various weather conditions, it might trigger other associations and emotions. Meanings are given to an eagle by itself already, but depending on the context that's given, it can mean something very different. It can even alter the atmosphere. In this particular piece, the viewer experiences such changes in different part of the film throughout. This is what I referred to as "hint film". What's more interesting is not how it looks but what it can stir up inside the audience's mind as they *feel* the picture. Each as an individual. The work leaves room for imagination and also encourages it.

LZ What are you implying with the baron (someone hurt) and the male in a white suit (someone lost in his search) in *The Nightman Cometh*? Especially when it is set against a gloomy, sleeting day, on a snow-covered ancient battlefield filled with artificial hills and rocks. Does it have to anything to do with your ongoing attempt in search for a spiritual life?

YE "Neorealism" is a kind of history theater where current and contemporary societal conditions come to play. Who exists in reality, the baron in his period costume or the ghost in a modern outfit? When the ancient battlefield scene and other historical events appear and reappear, where do they belong, in the past, the present or the night-falling future? How impossible it seems to make up your mind, when there is no easy answer to get from the narration! It is getting dark. The soldier or the warrior has to decide whether to disappear/escape (die) or to continue fighting, which of course might lead to the same fate – death. There is hope nonetheless. The body is essential, yet the soul is more precious still. It is the spirit which backs him up in life. How should we live our lives now? How do we identify ourselves with neorealistic historical events and continue to search for spiritual meanings? What do we really want?

LZ What will you do? Fight back or disappear?

YE To resist or to give up. At this moment, the truth is not important in the context of neorealism. I will keep searching for hope.

### Two or Three Things about *The Nightman Cometh*

When making *Dawn Mist, Separation Faith* (2009), Yang Fudong sought a film form that would allow the viewer to construct and make associations freely. The work features a total of nine scenes entirely inspired by classical film plots. From romance to Kung Fu, they are connected in terms of aesthetics and the attribute of time. As the artist has described in the past, repetition occurs constantly throughout the piece while

24 WEST 57<sup>TH</sup> STREET NEW YORK, NY 10019  
TEL: 212 977 7160 FAX: 212 581 5187

## MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

adjustments are made to certain variables, creating limitations with respect to aesthetic choices. This helps to expose the logic in time in all chosen sequences, in order to naturally reveal beauty in imperfection, surprises from abrupt bloopers, and a kind of penetration into the truth. Such an aesthetic paradox fosters added dimensionality to the piece. The presence of the camera, the film, and the projectionist creates multiple spatial relationships. Together with the exhibition space, they create a range of spaces for the work to occupy. They resemble stage, back stage, projection booth, etc. Hence, the viewer does not simply remain in their seat, but also acts on the stage and observes from the position of an outsider or even a projectionist. When the audience is able to roam freely in this manner, wearing multiple hats, it calls attention to the production process and ways of seeing, and the film is refreshed.

*The Fifth Night, Part I* (2011) was first exhibited at the ShanghART Gallery in Shanghai. Compared to *Dawn Mist, Separation Faith*, *The Fifth Night, Part I* has a more apparent agenda which deals with the aspect of time. In this piece, time in a theatrical sense is brought to the foreground, which, on the other hand, rules out the possibility of indeterminate interaction with the viewer. It returns to the method of auteur film: the experience of time is multi-layered, but it is derived from only one person's perspective. Seven cameras are put in motion simultaneously to record a story in which characters, scenes and plots interact in a common space and time. Yang dealt with seven complicated, outreaching perspectives and merged them into a parallel, yet expansive, visual experience. Meanwhile, the imagery of these seven screens forms a unified narrative that flows naturally in time. Distinct from *Dawn Mist, Separation Faith* or even the earlier *No Snow on the Broken Bridge* (2006), *The Fifth Night, Part I*, though captured in a seemingly simplistic fashion, has a sophisticated shooting plan in which the experiences of theater and 360-degree painting converge. Similar to the process of revealing scrolls in Chinese painting, the film makes the viewer anxious about what is going to happen next. The difference, however, is that the film does not dictate a particular order in which it must be viewed. It can work going from left to right or from right to left. In this sense, it evokes the Western tradition of 360-degree panorama paintings; any point of focus can be the starting point for seeing, and the point of departure does not affect the overall narrative of the image.

*One half of August* (2011) is Yang's experiment inspired by architecture and visual space, in which he attempts to challenge the limitations of visual experience. He does so by projecting videos from his *Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest* series onto buildings and architectural models and reshooting the projected images. A sense of theater is achieved through such a gesture. Meanwhile, scenes from the original films and the re-production of them together bring attention to the core architectural qualities of those buildings and models.

On some level, we can distinguish Yang's creative shifts and changes from the experiments in his work since 2009 which are discussed above. He is best known for his *An Estranged Paradise* (1997-2002), *Backyard – Hey! Sun is Rising* (2001), and *Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest* series (2003-2007). However, in more recent years, he has applied his experience working in shorts to making feature-length pictures. He now

## MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

works in a range of formats from regular film, to video art, to art film, all of which clash with convention; it is in this context that we should consider his more recent endeavors.

Since 2009, Yang's work has been increasingly theatrical. His artistic evolution over the past couple of years almost makes us forget the characteristics and themes of his earlier work. There are some scenes in *The Nightman Cometh* (2011) that are shot entirely in a studio, and they make strange and unexpected departures from reality. Such a renewed style appears to be alienating to some people who are more familiar with Yang's early work. They have an idea of his old approaches, and so they may overlook some external interventions outside of the image frame. Take the monitor playback footage and hand-made painting for example. In a continuous exhibition space, they serve the purpose of keeping the work in touch with an external passing of time – a “present tense” that is added to the overall piece. As Yang puts it, the paintings “make an alternative version of the film part of *The Nightman Cometh*.”

*The Nightman Cometh* is not a gesture to return to the short film format, nor does it resemble any of his other practices after 2009. His goal remains the same, however – to overcome the limitations and confinement that normally surround a video artist. The effort is made evident through the theme of the intellectual's spiritual life, along with the artist's use of narration, metaphor, and complexity in imagery and time.

One might argue that there are allegories in *The Nightman Cometh*, but Yang may disagree. He probably didn't expect to make a fable film; however, the title gives it away. It's getting dark soon. Both you and I are ghosts in a fantastical reality.

*Written by Li Zhenhua  
From his studio in Zurich  
March 11, 2012*