

Shan Shui 2010: H2O

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This exhibition marks the second installment of the Green Art Project launched by BCA director Weng Ling in 2009 with the exhibition “Shan Shui: Nature on the Horizon of Art”. By using contemporary art works as a focal point, the Green Art Project aims to stimulate discussion of the ways that humankind can move toward a sustainable balance between the natural environment and the needs of human society. The current exhibition, “Shan Shui 2010: H2O”, presents video works by four highly accomplished contemporary artists: Song Dong, Bill Viola, Wang Gongxin, and Janaina Tschäpe. Although these works are visually and conceptually quite distinct, what unites them is the fact that they all highlight a single, unique substance--water--which is an inescapable element of human existence.

Water is both in us and around us. Making up more than half of the physical composition of the human body, it is essential for human survival. At the same time, water covers more than 70 percent of the earth's surface. Perhaps the most remarkable characteristic of water is that it is a substance without a fixed form. It can appear as rain, mist, fog, dew, clouds, ice, sleet, snow, and hail, and as such larger natural formations as oceans, lakes, rivers, and waterfalls. Because it has long been recognized as a symbol of all that is changeable and fleeting in nature, water has fascinated countless artists who have a special feeling for the natural world.

By presenting this selection of contemporary artworks that imaginatively probe the meaning of water's constant presence in human life, “Shan Shui 2010: H2O” also aims to raise awareness of one of the most urgent environmental issues of the present day. Until recently counted among the planet's most abundant natural resources, water is now becoming dangerously scarce worldwide--one of the unintended consequences of global economic development and population growth. Today the constantly growing use of water for drinking, cooking, irrigation, industry, and sanitation is placing ever-increasing demands on existing water supplies.

Few countries face the magnitude and complexity of water issues that currently confront China. At present, more than 100 Chinese cities, including Beijing, face serious water shortages. The Chinese government has estimated that by 2030, China may have exploited all of its available water resources. China's water scarcity is aggravated by water pollution, which threatens public health and the quality of life. The political leadership in China is aware of the seriousness of the situation and the vital need to

manage China's water resources, if the country's economic growth is to be sustained. It is taking steps to protect the country's water supply and halt the depletion water resources; to safeguard the ecological systems associated with China's lakes and rivers; and to reduce water pollution. Whether these efforts are enough to avert a wide-spread water crisis will be seen in the years ahead.

We hope that visitors to "Shan Shui 2010: H₂O" will devote time to enjoying and appreciating the remarkably inventive artworks that are on display. But it is also our hope that visitors to the exhibition will begin to give heightened attention to the practical questions of water conservation and purification that are now being discussed in China and around the world.

Water in Classical and Contemporary Art

Shanshui (山水), the Chinese ideogram for "landscape," brings together the characters for "mountain" (山 shan) and "water" or "river" (水 shui). If "mountain" evokes nature's stability and monumentality, "water" points to a different aspect of nature: its fluid, changing, dynamic side. In classical Chinese painting from the time of the Tang dynasty onward, water was recognized as a specialized subject requiring an unusual degree of technical skill from the artist. "Water is a living thing," wrote the Northern Song painter Guo Xi (郭熙), who left written recommendations for the best ways to depict water, clouds, and mist. Usually, it was not wash techniques but linear patterns that Chinese artists employed to suggest water's transient qualities: its spontaneity, vitality, swiftness, turbulence, or stagnation.

The close observation of water's changing states resulted in a number of artistic masterworks. In the Palace Museum in Beijing is a series of 12 remarkable album leaves from around 1200 A.D., attributed to Ma Yuan (马远). Working in ink and watercolor on silk, this brilliant draftsman carried out a sequence of variations on the theme of water's continual transformation: as mist and cloud, breaking waves, or turbulent seas, for example. At the same time, the metaphoric significance of water was not overlooked by Chinese painters. In the celebrated album-leaf painting *The Red Cliff* by Southern Song artist Li Song (李嵩), a tiny boat containing three figures and an oarsman they makes its way through the swirling rapids of a river filled with threatening rocks: an evocation of the turbulent journey of life.

The lyrical, poetic qualities of early Chinese depictions of water could not differ more sharply from the near-scientific studies of moving water carried out in early 16th-century Italy by Leonardo da Vinci. Leonardo was fascinated by water not only as an artistic subject but also as the object of

scientific and technological study. Having taken part in canal-planning projects in Italy, he was eager to analyze and harness the physical power of water. The impact of this introduction of the techniques of scientific observation into aesthetic practice can still be felt in Western art. Jumping to the 1960s, for example, we find the German conceptual artist Hans Haacke filling Plexiglas cubes with water that condensed or evaporated as the light and temperature changed in the surrounding gallery. The resulting sculpture was a kind of scientific experiment, a "weather system in a box."

An equally distinctive Western approach to the portrayal of water in painting arose in the early 19th century, with the arrival of a dramatic style of seascape painting associated with the Romantic notion of the "sublime." In his scenes of ships tossed on stormy seas, the British painter J.M.W. Turner depicted the ocean as a living, almost monstrous creature--one that was unpredictable, capricious, and capable of shattering human efforts with its incalculable force. Turner also introduced a specifically modernist drama of human perception into his ocean paintings: in them, the combined atmospheric effects of sea, cloud, spray, and mist produce a dizzying, almost abstract space that quickly disorients the viewer.

In contemporary Chinese art, as the art historian David Clarke has detailed in his stimulating book *Water and Art*, water has been a surprisingly frequent theme. Song Dong, Yin Xiuzhen, Fang Lijun, Liu Xiaodong, Zhang Huan, Qiu Zhijie, Wang Jin, He Yunchang--these and many other Chinese artists have been repeatedly attracted to water as a subject. To fully understand the sources of this attraction would be a matter of deep interest. It might owe to the historic role played by canal-building, irrigation, and flooding in Chinese civilization; or to the monumental building projects involving bridges and dams that have taken place since the founding of the People's Republic; or to growing awareness of the fragility of China's water resources. Whether the reasons are historical, cultural, or individual, the importance of water in Chinese contemporary art is clearly unequalled anywhere in the world.

Works in the Exhibition

The works in "Shan Shui 2010: H₂O" do not attempt to speak directly to the complex environmental issues involving water today. Instead, they are intended to demonstrate the range of ways in which imaginative artists have begun to reconsider water's significance in human culture today.

The American artist Bill Viola, who started to work with video in the 1970s, has long been recognized as one of world's leading pioneers of this new medium. Viola has been a consistent technological innovator while at the same time exploring such universal themes as birth, death, and the boundaries

of consciousness. For reasons that are deep-seated and individual, he has frequently turned to water as a subject. His fascination with water arises, Viola says, from his personal experience of a near-fatal accident. "I almost drowned when I was six years old on a family holiday at Trout Lake in upstate New York. It was possibly the most profound, life-changing and transcendent experience I've ever had. It was accompanied by a complete lack of fear--only calm and peace. When I think about it now it centers me again." Many of his videos portray figures completely immersed in water, cut off from the world, in situations that can be seen as either life-threatening or blissfully peaceful.

Viola originally created the video diptych in this exhibition, *Ablutions* (2005), to accompany a performance of Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*, which tells the story of two doomed lovers. *Ablutions* presents a Christian ritual of bodily purification via a pair of vertical-format video images that were shot by a camera from an unchanging position. Each image shows, in slowed-down time, a stream of water pouring from a fountain. Illuminated by artificial lights, the water shimmers hypnotically. Slowly a pair of out-of-focus figures--a man and a woman whose faces are never seen--emerge from the shadows. They slowly walk toward the water stream and calmly wash their hands under the flow. As the water hits their hands, it suddenly spills out in all directions, sparkling like scattered diamonds. The figures then move back into the shadows, and the cycle begins again. Like many of Viola's video works, *Ablutions* attempts to dramatically slow down the viewer's perceptual response, in an effort to create a concentrated mood of stillness and meditation.

Beijing artist Wang Gongxin continues his exploration of innovative new video forms with the installation *Rain, or Water* (2010), commissioned for this exhibition by BCA. Trained as an oil painter at Beijing Capital Normal University, Wang Gongxin lived in New York with his wife, artist Lin Tianmiao, from 1987 to 1995. Following his return to China, he became one of the first generation of Chinese artists (along with Zhang Peili and Qiu Zhijie) to adopt video as an art medium. His expansive video installations accomplish a rare feat, combining video's power to record direct images of reality and its ability to suggest extremely personal subjective states. This ability to strike an unexpected balance between lens-based realism and dreamlike imagination characterizes virtually all of Wang Gongxin's video work.

His 32-channel installation *Rain, or Water* employs six overhead video projectors to present a sequence of images of water falling as if in a downpour. Carefully conceived and edited, these fast-paced, syncopated images of falling water striking a variety of objects playfully suggests the vast spectrum of physical and visual transformations that drenching rain can produce.

Janaina Tschäpe grew up in Brazil and Germany--the countries of her mother and father--and studied painting and sculpture at the Hochschule der Bildende Künste in Hamburg, Germany. Her paintings, drawings, photographs, and videos all reflect an artistic attitude that could be described as extreme Romanticism. Tschäpe has a continuing love for the fairy tales of northern Europe and the mythic tales of South America. Her work has been decisively influenced by her powerful childhood dreams of living underwater as mermaid. (She is, in fact, named for a half-human, half-fish Afro-Brazilian sea goddess who is regarded as the "mother of the waters.") In her photographs and videos, Tschäpe often appears in startling costumes, with her face masked and her body weirdly distorted by latex outfits or water-filled plastic appendages. These bizarre images, which dramatize extraordinary physical and emotional states, can awaken feelings of both fascination and profound discomfort in the viewer.

Blood Sea (2004), the four-screen video installation that appears in this exhibition, unfolds a visually extravagant ocean fantasy involving mythic aquatic creatures such as mermaids and sirens. The work grew out of Tschäpe's meditation on the origins of the first living, single-cell origins in the primordial ocean, and the similarity of the chemical constituents of ocean water and human blood. The video features haunting glimpses of female figures clad in colorful, flowing gowns, as they float underwater with dazzling sunlight pouring down from the water's surface.

More than perhaps any artist working today, Song Dong has consistently assigned a key role to water as a material and a central theme in his art. Trained as a painter at Beijing Capital Normal University, he has concentrated his activity primarily on installation works, performance, calligraphy, site-specific projects, and video; these works often emphasize the process of art rather than the finished product. Song Dong's numerous water works embrace concerns that are both personal and conceptual. Water Diary (1995-present), one of his best-known pieces, is an outgrowth of the artist's experience as a child, when his father taught him to practice calligraphy in a frugal manner by writing with water on a stone. For the past 15 years, as a personal ritual and a meditative practice, Song Dong has used a brush dipped in water to set down diary entries on a flat black stone using water. These daily inscriptions, of course, evaporate rapidly and leave no discernible trace.

A more dramatic work by Song Dong similarly employs water to call attention to the fleeting nature of human endeavor. Stamping the Water (1996) was made as part of an international art project called "Defenders of the Water." The work consists of 36 photographs that document an hour-

long performance carried out by Song Dong while standing in the Lhasa River in Tibet. In the photographs, Song Dong repeatedly raises over his head an archaic wooden seal carved with the Chinese character shui 水 (water), and then attempts to "stamp" the surface of the fast-flowing river. His enigmatic action leads the viewer to speculate on the transience of language, the futility of human gestures, and the indifference of nature.

Song Dong's new installation Touched 100 Years (2010) was commissioned by BCA especially for presentation in this exhibition. It consists of one hundred small video players that extend in a line around the gallery. On these tiny screens, the viewer sees images that Song Dong has gathered from Internet--images that record moments from each of the past one hundred years. Each image is reflected on a watery surface that Song Dong sometimes touches with his hand, so as to "dissolve" the image in the rippling water. In this way, he invites the viewer to ponder the ephemerality of history as well as the transience of human memory.