

MASTER'S THESIS

Landscape Narratives: A Study of Social Consciousness in Contemporary Chinese Art

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally regarded as being at the top of the Chinese painting hierarchy and intertwined with literati culture, Chinese landscape paintings have been a significant source of inspiration for Chinese artists from the past to the present day. However, the meanings of landscape painting and its modes of expression have moved beyond conventional cultural, social, or artistic habits and stereotypical notions of ethnicity or nationality and have been reimagined through artists' individualised references. Today, in the context of the numerous complex issues shaping our diverse, global, and rapidly changing world, contemporary Chinese artists have responded to and even engaged with social and political affairs and raised thought-provoking questions and critiques through their artistic practice of landscape.

Believing art is socially inspired and pursuing my concerns about individuals' social conditions under the repressive rules of authoritarian regimes, I have sought inspiration from the practice of Chinese landscape painting and this genre of art has served as a vehicle for me to explore my concerns. In this research, I have demonstrated how the creative practices of Chinese landscape painting can indirectly reveal the suppression of society under authoritarianism and possible means of resistance against absolute power through the method of ink art by 1) recontextualising the eternality of monumental landscape painting within the dominance of authoritarian regimes and the forlornness experienced by individuals in an authoritarian society; 2) coalescing the idea of sublime nature in British Romanticism with the notion of Chinese landscape painting, thus disrupting the traditional representation of ideal landscapes and inner peace by evoking catastrophic scenery and anxious emotions in traditional Chinese art; 3) reimagining the traditional farewell scroll in Chinese landscape painting in the contemporary context of immigration; 4) contextualising the symbols of

gentlemen in traditional Chinese landscape motifs into the virtue of persistence under the enormous oppression of an authoritarian regime by painting them inside the grids of ancient Chinese writing papers; 5) blending the abstract quality of Chinese characters with the abstract expression of landscape motifs to deliver hidden messages and information; 6) re-examining the idea of the conventional learning method of landscape painting and calligraphy, that is, repeated and schematic copying, in association with the notion of “Newspeak”; 7) reimagining the actual scene landscape through surveillance; and 8) expanding the ideas of traditional painting media and their display formats through an examination of installations and the use of various media, including metal leaves and found objects. This thesis partly serves to document the research, production of the exhibits, the ideas and concepts embedded in the artworks, as well as the curatorial concept behind the exhibition.