Since 2005, the now Beijing-based multi-media artist Chen Shaoxiong has created five short animated films consisting of ink paintings transcribed from photographic images that were either taken by the artist or culled from the internet. Filtering imagery primarily through the lenses of the digital camera, the artist asserts ways of looking drastically different from how a traditionally trained ink artist goes about depicting things. But what makes these videos exceptional is that subverting the old perceptive mechanism is beside the point: his art is simply not concerned with yet another reactionary strategy, but is rather unmistakably grounded in the *here* and *now*.[1]

The first installment in the series, *Ink City* (2005), commences with an all-too-familiar journey from an airport onto the highway, in a tightly paced slide-show accompanied by a sound track featuring the city's ubiquitous hustle and bustle. The perspective is ever-changing as the viewer travels vicariously through the artist's eyes and lenses: partial views of docking aircraft through the panoramic windows at an airport; gazes upward to the sky, crisscrossed by interweaving overpasses; or glances from a distance at a traffic accident on the street. Close-ups of strangers rhythmically flicker by; their faces and expressions at the particular moments captured invite scrutiny but don't register.

The acoustic affects are equally nuanced: breaking sounds of wind through half rolled-up car windows synchronize with views along a fast-moving vehicle. For dining scenes in a restaurant, brief stops at home where encounters with family members take place, or a drunken moment in a karaoke bar ensue, slightly slower tempo of display helps to signify more relaxing and private realms. Towards the film's end, the journey resumes full-speed onto a highway bathed in warm shades of street light at midnight. Essentially none of these impressions linger, and urban life fluctuates in a flurry of "vernacular glances."[2]

Chen Shaoxiong's unique sensitivity and keen observation of the urban state of mind owe largely to his own experiences growing up and making art in one of China's most buzzing metropolises. Born in Shantou, Guangdong in 1962, Chen enrolled in Guandong Academy of Art in Guangzhou in 1980, concentrating on print-making. Shortly after Deng Xiaoping's initiation of the Reform and Open Doors Policy (1979) and the

Chen Shaoxiong, stills from *Ink City*, 2005

onset of economic experiments along China's Southern coasts, many cities, such as Shenzhen and Guangzhou, embraced the initial waves of explosive development: urban structures and soaring skyscrapers that would later serve as the prototype for cities all over China sprouted here overnight. The cultural landscape of the Pearl River Delta region, observes curator Hou Hanru, is characterized by "social structures based on multi-directional and multicultural principles that shrewdly escape the dominance of the official ideological, political, and social systems of control," cultivating artists known for a more pragmatic mindset, "non-confrontational proposals aimed at opening up a new horizon of change beyond the established models of struggle," and artworks that are "consistently critical without falling into political clichés."[3]

Explorations of urban life have permeated Chen Shaoxiong's art since his early involvement with the "Big-Tail Elephant" group, an experimental art collective he co-founded in the early 1990s with fellow artists Lin Yilin, Xu Tan, and Liang Juhui. A shared, deep-seated interest in the manifold realities and discontents of China's new-found urbanization unifies the otherwise loosely organized Guangzhou-based group. Contrary to the over-philosophizing tendencies of the '85 Movement—the first and most crucial full-blown moment of China's artistic postmodernity, practitioners in the early 1990s shifted their focus to engage material culture. Increasing interest in the private domain and an intimate, personal approach in creating and exhibiting art are evident in such instances as what later became known as Apartment Art. Small-scale installations and video art prevailed among artists at this time, as the technology and equipment

Chen Shaoxiong, *Street*, 1997.

necessary to make these works became more easily accessible.

The art practices of the early 1990s and the vibrant, rapidly urbanizing city of Guangzhou clearly inspired Chen Shaoxiong and cultivated his artistic sensibility. In his earlier "photo-collage" series *Street* and *Homescape*, both widely cited in major surveys of contemporary Chinese art, Chen constructs miniature scenes by re-assembling cut-outs of people, furniture, street signs, traffic lights, billboards, etc. from numerous photographs he had taken over several years. He then re-contextualizes them by situating the miniature *Homescapes* in real-estate models, or juxtaposing the *Street* series with real streets in Chinese and foreign cities, such as Berlin and Paris. By way of collage and juxtaposition that expose uncanny spatiotemporal relationships, he was able to reproduce "the illogical chaos, the ungraspable rules, as well as the enduring charm" of modern cities.[4] Chen explicates that his methodology of "photo-collage" stems from a profound distrust of single-frame photographs, as he is always more intrigued by "what's left outside the frame and the moments leading up to as well as after the framed one."[4]

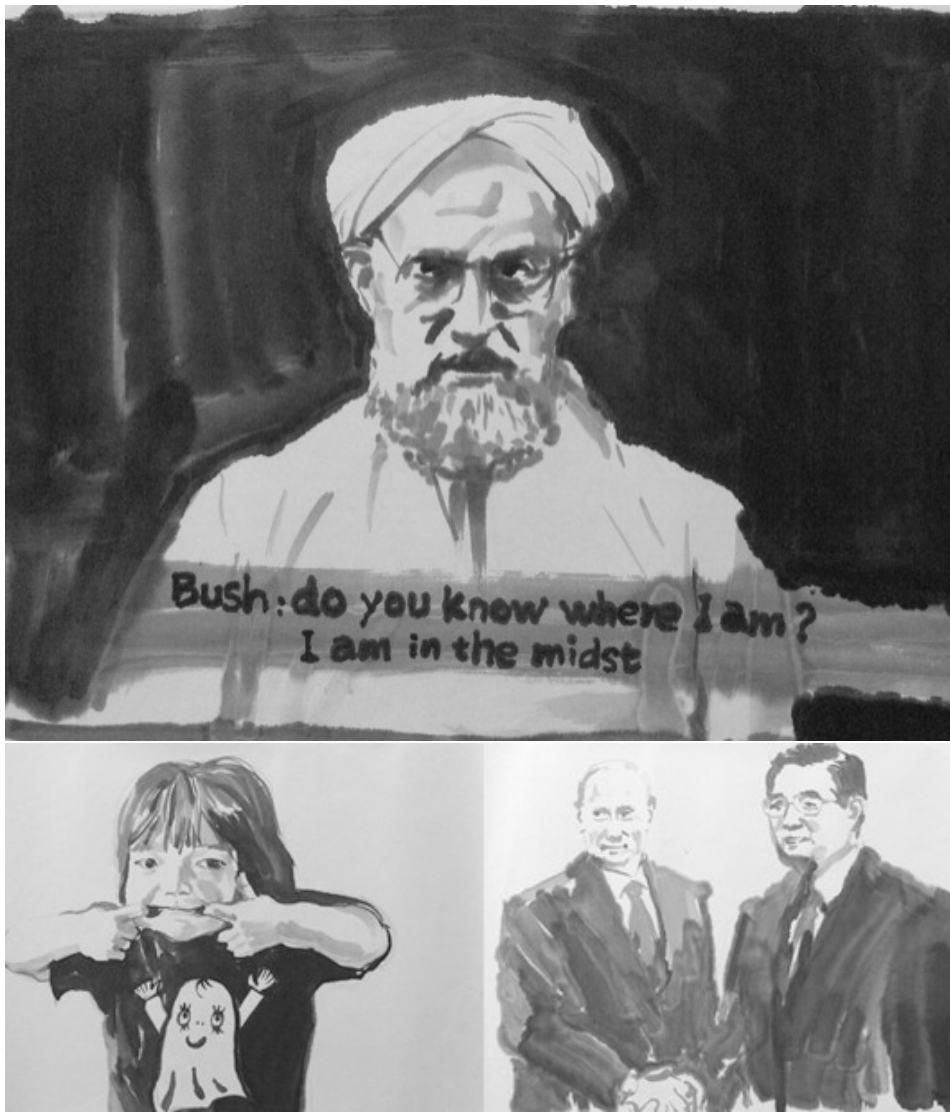
The selection of imagery in *Ink City*, similar to that in previous miniscule constructions of urban scenes, is at once specific and generic. Chen savors the increasingly homogenizing appearances of China's prospering

Chen Shaoxiong, *Ink City*, 2005.

cities: the seemingly continuous journey in *Ink City* did not take place in one locale, but rather jumbles together skylines, landmarks, transportation systems, and architectures peculiar to multiple metropolises. Urbanscapes of such places as Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen are seamlessly interwoven and further unified by monochromatic ink wash, leaving the work oscillating between a linear narrative and parallel realities, between continuum and interchangeability.

While dazzled by the flux of images, one would also marvel at the prominent physicality of ink, its effortless expressiveness and representational versatility perpetuating each constituent sketch. *Ink City* consists of about three hundred individual ink paintings, many of which tackle enormously complicated anatomical features, figure groups, architectural elements, and even interior scenes with multiple light sources. In a "snapshot" of people riding the subway, for instance, Chen captures with quick and visibly few strokes subtle contrasts between idle subway riders and an arm-locked couple caught up in conversation, while light from the electric lamp cascades down the figure group before dissolving into a pale shimmer in the windows.

These richly nuanced paintings create a drag against the flow of the video as the viewer attempts to stare for longer and more closely. In the meantime, making elaborate ink drawings of photographed fragments of life, according to the artist, also serves to "filtrate unnecessary details"



Chen Shaoxiong, stills from *Ink Diary*, 2006.

not pertinent to his memories, but that photography nevertheless indiscriminately documents.[6]

In his next film, *Ink Diary* (2006), the artist began to incorporate "animated" episodes where urbanscapes gradually emerge through additions of strokes and ink-wash, a recurring element that segments snapshots of lived moments, images of world-leaders, or media clips of political events. Another recurring motif is the animated pornographic vignettes, which not only punctuate the flow but also subvert the seriousness of it all—a typical wry sense of humor that characterizes much of Chen's oeuvre.[7]

Towards the end, the film's unsettling electronic score amplifies while bold slashes of ink ominously obliterate the previously evolving city-view. Explicitly evoking the frenzied yet ill-planned cycles of urban construction and demolition, the artist also alludes to the fragility of modern-day concrete jungles that are increasingly "exposed to the fate of becoming involved with new forms of geopolitical conflicts and wars, including both formal and informal acts of violence."[8] In one of his earliest video works, *Landscape* (1996), the artist films places throughout a burgeoning city behind transparent sheets on which assorted weapons, tanks, or fighter jets are drawn in markers to superimpose real urban structures and public spaces. Media saturation of atrocities and deeply traumatic events such as the 9/11 have come to define how we perceive and experience urban spaces, and vividly so—the artist, for instance, considers himself only two meters (the distance between him and the TV screen) away from the terrorist attack in New York.[9] In the following year he produced a series of disturbing and quixotic animated videos that showcase, through digital image manipulations, how landmark buildings in major Chinese cities can dodge attacks of hijacked planes in *Anti-Terrorism Variety* (2002).

Chen Shaoxiong, *Landscape*, 1996.

His two 2007 films—*The Days* and *Ink Things* - took intriguing turns. *The Days* unfolds as the artist rambles along, both visually and literally in a stream-of-consciousness monologue delivered in his wonderful Cantonese-accented Mandarin. New filmic and animation effects also proliferate, such as zooming in and out, focusing and blurring, a long shot scrolling along a panoramic view of factories in Dongguan (Guandong), or shifting light-shadow modulation over consecutive stills to suggest the quick lapse of time, as seen in the subtle transitions from direct to slanted sunlight across the face of artist Tsuyoshi Ozawa riding on a train.

Chen's fellow artists (Yang Jiechang, Chen Tong, Liu Wei) as well as gallerists (such as Pi Li), collectors ("Business dinner in Basel"), and

Chen Shaoxiong, *Anti-Terrorism Variety*, 2002.

critics ("the downfall of Scandinavian performance art") appear in this decidedly autobiographical film, offering sneak-peaks into a contemporary artist's social orbit amidst his other routines.[10] Chen wrote the script after completing the film, not so much to narrate or explain, but to comment on and complement the images through delightful inter-contextualization, very much reminiscent of prose and poetry so often found inscribed on traditional paintings. A witty and slightly romantic poem concludes the film, as consummate gradations of ink give form to typical Cantonese landscapes where low-rise buildings stand amongst lush semitropical vegetation while previous scenes intermittently reappear. The poem reads:

> There's a hill outside my window, a barrack rests at the foot of the hill, and lots of PLA soldiers live in the barracks; there are buildings outside my window, a small road winds down the base of these buildings, and lots of parked cars fill the small road; there is a factory outside my window, lots of immigrants work in the factory, there are factory boys and there are factory girls; there is a playground outside my back window, some people are playing basket ball there, and a big

Detail from Chen Shaoxiong's script for The Days, 2007.

speaker hangs just beside the backboard, the speaker plays pop songs every-day, and the pop songs are all about love stories.[11]

Chen's film is as much about "living among others" as about living among things, and *Ink Things* (2007) investigates the contemporary object-scape with indulgence as well as sarcasm.[12] With jumpy, percussive beats appears a long sequence of things that we touch (door knobs), use (utensils, watches), and possess (furniture and guns); things that define and reflect our very existence (wedding ring, passport, ID cards) and things that help us see (glasses, mirrors, a digital camera); things we covet (perfume, cash, roasted ducks hung in the window) and things more obscure (well lids); things that we cannot imagine living without (computers and ipods). Things are depicted in the context of other things that populate our world en abyme. The list occasionally becomes questionable, featuring eyes, hands, bosoms, or the ubiquitous statues of Mao, as if to suggest all are but things consumed, materialistically or ideologically. But their omnipresence, sense of intimacy, and the fact that each single "thing" is so meticulously depicted by the artist's hands, radiates assuring warmth that suggests an emotional dimension. They might also call to mind poignant associations with idioms such as "things remain the same while people have changed," or "circumstances alter with the passage of time." [13]

As early as the Ming dynasty, texts—most prominently literatus Wen

Zhenheng's *Superfluous Things* (1621)—were written to offer cultivated gentlemen guidance in navigating the world of things and in making savvy choices about possessions; from vessels, tables and couches to adornments and arrangement of gardens, qualities of "things" reflect the owner's taste and character. Things accumulated around us today are less dictated by taste than by unbridled consumerism propelled by a neoliberal global economy, and our relationship with them is characterized by a sense of "voraciousness, lack of discrimination, wandering attention, and the equal horror of meaning and emptiness," rather than discretion.[14] If *Superfluous Things* was the cultural product of the so-called "early modern period" in which "sprouts of capitalism" began to emerge in China's more affluent southern regions, *The Things* is Chen's conscious response to the current material culture at the other end of capitalism's centuries-long adventure in China.[15] But one element remains unchanged: things reflect our identity, and nothing portrays a contemporary artist - his tools and leisure, his peripatetic career or global scope, the contemporary art world he inhabits and its cultural arbiters - with more insightful subtlety than a simple, crisp picture in which a digital camera rests atop *Art in America*. Perhaps as an unforeseen sequel to this work, following the collapse of the global financial market in 2008, the artist created a succinctly pungent installation *Seeing is Believing* (2009), where slogans of global financial power-houses (such as "Citi Never Sleeps") are cut out, pasted on high windows, and projected by natural light so that the shadows they cast form clear messages on the floor. The unpredictability of weather conditions, which determines the readability of these messages, certainly serve as a perfect metaphor, while the piece's haunting ethereality in tandem with the light's rich religious associations seems to allude to yet another "twilight of the idols."

Around 2009, Chen Shaoxiong, like many artists who has spent a significant part of their career in southern parts of China, migrated north to Beijing and produced another animation work in ink, *Ink History* (2010), a collage of China's modern history consisting of ink drawings based on images exclusively found through the internet, accompanied by a soundtrack mixing well-known propaganda songs, historical speeches, and a clock's tireless ticking. For anyone growing up in China, many selected images seem all too familiar, overly media-saturated, and politically correct, while others disturbing and heavily-censored. Chen was satisfied with neither: his attention is perpetually directed towards those left out of the frozen frames of historical archive, asking "what do we see when we look at historical materials?" [16]

Chen Shaoxiong, stills from *Ink History*, 2010.

In *Ink History*, the artist's presence does not come across as vividly as it did in the previous four movies, though it was inspired by very intimate conversations with his grandmother. The centenarian's personal accounts of her life through much of China's modern period have always fascinated the artist, who is deeply skeptical of historical narratives of any kind. The penchant for the crisis of historicity and collective memory of recent decades—where hypermodernity and remnants from the constantly buried and repainted historical pasts never cease to collide—is shared by many contemporary Chinese artists regardless of generation. Reasons as to why these issues loom large in non-Western contemporary art, in Homi Bhabha's eloquent analysis, perhaps lie in that "when historical visibility has faded, when the present tense of testimony loses its power to arrest, then the displacements of memory and the indirections of art offer us the image of our psychic survival. To live in an unhomely world, to find its ambivalences and ambiguities enacted in the house of fiction, or its sundering and splitting performed in the work of art, is also to affirm a profound desire of social solidarity: I am looking for the join…I want to join…I want to Join."[17]

Video art, with its own dimension of time, seems particularly suited to confront history, evident in works by such artists as Zhang Peili (b.1957) and Yang Fudong (b.1971). But animation's inherent "plasmaticness"—initially coined to denote the weightlessness and transformative freedom of Disney's characters—promises still more possibilities.[18] The specific medium of ink animation—where images can be more easily compiled, manipulated, and sequenced—lends itself to questioning and reconstructing historical realities. Two other notable contemporary Chinese artists working with ink animation, Qiu Anxiong (b. 1972) and Sun Xun (b. 1980), have pushed such debates, doubts, and throes into fictional, theatrical, and even mythological

realms with their riveting tales and powerful auteurship. In this regard, works by the renowned South African artist William Kentridge (b.1955), whose video *Shadow Procession* (1999) caused a sensation at the 2000 Shanghai Biennial, is an undeniable inspiration. As Karen Smith observes, "that his films narrate morality tales of the human condition, its fallibility, its destructive impulses, its suffering, only made the relevance to emerging generations of young adults—grappling with the socio-political paradoxes of their own country—stronger."[19] But Chen Shaoxiong remained mostly true to his source imagery, exposing relationships between preexisting accounts and narratives instead of resorting to allegories, as if suggesting that what we see is even more unbelievable than fanciful re-imaginations.

The constituent drawings that combine photo-realistic technique and the "ink on paper" medium in Chen Shaoxiong's videos, while remarkably virtuosic, are quite distant from established formal parameters of traditional ink art. Alternatively, as vivid "specimens of our time," they speak eloquently to the fact that perhaps the traditional representational repertoire could no longer adequately capture an era defined by a rampant proliferation of things, images, texts, and ultimately new mechanisms of seeing.[20] While traditional prototypes are still appropriated by contemporary artists, they often appear somewhat formulaic. Spatial and compositional arrangements that have been developed, perfected, and manipulated by artists over centuries also underwent phenomenological transformations, while China's latest urbanism has transformed still more landscapes—geographical, political, cultural, and artistic.

Yet Chen Shaoxiong confesses to have a psychological affinity with ink—a kind of "ink complex" that had intensified with age.[21] His only education in traditional ink painting came by way of observing his older brother painting as a child, but the lack of formal training perhaps ironically frees him to paint photo-realistically—and essentially a-historically—in ink, as professional ink artists train (or at least begin their training) by rigorous learning of established representational and compositional formulas, rather than through observing the real world. If asked to depict tree-branches from life, for instance, their hands will likely be so primed by the learned types that the outcome will reflect their training rather than actuality. Xu Bing's recent conceptual work *Mustard Seed Garden Manual Landscape* (2010) playfully subverts this epistemological system by literally amassing the different type-forms taken from the famous Qing dynasty painting manual (demonstrating not only legitimate ways of rendering various forms, but also following particular painters' styles)

to construct a thoroughly convincing traditional Chinese landscape scroll. With his signature deconstructive strategy, Xu Bing created this landscape scroll by directing questions towards how things came into being, but Chen Shaoxiong's ink animations, with all their critical capacity, are decidedly constructive in that they promise new possibilities in exploring not only the unique aesthetic qualities of ink, but also its ability to effectively engage contemporary China without falling into formal and iconological ruts of "Chinese-ness."

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Notes

1 All of Chen Shaoxiong's videos are available for viewing on his personal website: chenshaoxiong.net.
2 Rosalind Krauss, "Perpetual Inventory," *October* 88 (April 1, 1999), 87.
3 Hou Hanru,"Chen Shaoxiong, "From Portable Streets to Private Diplomacy," http://chenshaoxiong.net/?p=844
4 Chen Shaoxiong, "About 'Streetscape'," http://chenshaoxiong.net/?p=1291
5 Ibid.
6 Interview with the artist on October 9th, 2010.
7 In an AAA interview October 27th, 2007, Shao Hong analyzed that pornographic materials flooding in Guangzhou in the 1980s that were appropriated by many artists as direct visual resources. See *Materials of the Future: Documenting contemporary Chinese art from 1980-1990*, available at http://www.china1980s.org/files/interview/shftfinalised_20110221145620971l.pdf
8 Hou Hanru,"Chen Shaoxiong, From Portable Streets to Private Diplomacy," http://chenshaoxiong.net/?p=844.
9 Interview with the artist on October 9th, 2010.
10 Quoted texts come from scripts of *The Days*.
11 Edited from the English subtitles in the original film, though admittedly the rhythmic quality in Mandarin is regrettably inevitably lost.
12 Chen Shaoxiong, "About 'Streetscape'," http://chenshaoxiong.net/?p=1291.
13 Corresponding Chinese characters of the idioms: 物是人非，时过境迁。
14 Rosalind Krauss, "Perpetual Inventory," *October,* 88 (April 1, 1999), 87.
15 Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 4.
16 Chen Shaoxiong, "Ink History Statement," http://chenshaoxiong.net/?p=225
17 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: routledge, 1994), 27.
18 Rosalind Krauss, "'The Rock': William Kentridge's Drawings for Projection," *October* 92 (April 1, 2000), 16.
19 Karen Smith, "Uncertain Endings: the Animated Short Films of Sun Xun," *Platform China,* http://www.platformchina.org/en/article_show.asp?id=68
20 Chen Shaoxiong. "In-between Three Mediums." http://www.chenshaoxiong.com/MANU/blog/ blog_cn.html.
21 Interview with the artist on October 9th, 2010.





modern art asia

selected papers, issues 1-8
edited by Majella Munro








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modern and contemporary art from emerging markets

www.enzoarts.com
orders@enzoarts.com

Modern Art Asia
Published in the UK by Enzo Arts and Publishing Limited

First edition 2012

ISSN: 2049-4467

#MAA1TO8

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