

Liu Yujia: A Darkness Shimmering in the Light

Curator: Mia Yu

2023.6.22 – 7.30

Tang Contemporary Art Beijing 1st Space

Tang Contemporary Art is pleased to announce the opening of Liu Yujia's solo exhibition "A Darkness Shimmering in the Light", curated by art historian Mia Yu, on June 22nd at 4pm in the gallery's Beijing 1st Space. The exhibition takes the scattered light in the northern forest as a consistent trope and the notion of frontier as a speculative perspective that transcends geopolitics, presenting the artist's two bodies of recent work, filmed on location in Xinjiang and China's Northeast from 2019 to 2023, and interpreting the artist's "eco-fiction" films which is interwoven by multi-media and text.

Through the Ethereal Glow of the Northern Frontiers

Mia Yu

Pervading the forests stretching across Northeast Asia is an elusive and shimmering light – the essence of the temperate coniferous forests, where the soul of the region resides. Beneath this dappled light, the data and energy of life pass between ginseng, mushroom, moss, musk deer, and all the other members of the forest biome.

From 2022 to 2023, artist Liu Yujia embarked on four long journeys deep into the Changbai Mountains and the upper stream of the Songhua River. During her frequent voyages through the North's ethereal glow, she filmed all four seasons of Northeast China. For the artist, the long journeys were an awe-inspiring and transformative life experience; for the timeless Eurasian landmass, her arrivals and departures were as fleeting as a flicker of light.

Taking inspiration from the pervasive, glimmering and all-immersive light in the boreal forests as a trope that calls the human-nature duality into question, the exhibition "A Darkness Shimmering in the Light" presents Liu Yujia's two bodies of recent work about ecological entanglements, filmed respectively on location at the Kunlun Mountains in Xinjiang and the Changbai Mountains in China's Northeast. The exhibition highlights the artist's approach to film as a form of eco-fiction that is intricately interwoven with documentary footage, ethnography, local mythology, folklore, and embodied experiences. Looming in the backdrop of these films are the majestic contours of two prominent mountain ranges in Asia, as well as China's two national frontiers, both suffused with complex histories, geopolitics and extractive economies. Here, the notion of the frontier ecology is taken as a speculative perspective that has the potentiality to transcend geopolitics. By juxtaposing the artist's works on these two frontier regions, the exhibition attempts to present Liu Yujia's eco-fiction as a space where historical, ecological, spiritual and personal dimensions intersect, and also an experimental approach to evoke emotive and affective forms of kinship of the human and non-human.

Liu Yujia began her exploration of frontier regions in 2015 by filming Black Ocean in Karamay, which was completed in 2016. Since then, she ventured further into the Xinjiang hinterland, where she witnessed melting glaciers, dried-up riverbeds resulting from climate change, ancient civilizations buried under desert sands, and landscapes shattered by excessive exploitation of resources. Liu Yujia's film Treasure Hunt, for which filming started in 2019 and finished in 2021, weaves together two excavation narratives: one is Aurel Stein's early 20th-century archaeological expeditions to the Kunlun Mountains and Hotan region; the other is the ethnic Uyghur laborers digging the dried riverbed of Yurungkax River for precious jade. With her works in Xinjiang, Liu Yujia began to perceive the landscape of the frontier as a portal for travelling through time and space, bridging history with the realities of the present and the boundless horizons of future imagination.

In 2022, Liu Yujia shifted her focus to the vast landmass of China's Northeast, further advancing her exploration of the frontier into the ecological realm. Her exploration of the Changbai Mountain region shed light on contradictions inherent within the frontier ecology: the Changbai Mountains, Amur River, Ussuri River, Tumen River, Yalu River and Reka Argun River are some of the majestic mountain ranges and prominent rivers of Northeast China that demarcate the borders between modern nation-states. The formation of national borders is a complex process entangled with colonial history, imperialist expansion, war, immigration, and the socialist nation-building. However, mountains and rivers are also interconnected ecological entities whose very nature challenges the notion of separation. Viewed from an ecological perspective, Northeast China is a frontier region in which nature and culture, the geopolitical and the mythical, the human and the more-than-human merge in an everyday fashion that threatens to dislodge these binaries all together. It is the paradoxical tension between separation and connection that captivated Liu Yujia, compelling her to return to Northeast China time and again and to explore its paradoxical potentiality through an embodied practice of travel-filming.

Liu Yujia's creative process always begins by throwing herself into the vast lands of deserts, forests, snowfields, and glaciers. "All you need to do is embark on the journey!" Liu Yujia embarks on her journey with resolute determination. She surrenders her senses to the unknown and embraces all possibilities and uncertainties. She ventures into the midst of sandstorms, blizzards and extreme cold, and grapples with technical glitches while crossing paths with herds of deer, hunters, loggers, mountaineers, self-exiles, and shamans. She delves into a working style akin to what Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar refers to as "sentipensar," that is, a way of knowing that does not separate thinking from feeling, reason from emotion, knowledge from caring.

Over the course of a year, Liu Yujia has filmed a substantial amount of documentary footage in the Changbai Mountain region, utilizing mediums that include 16mm film, digital camera, drone, and GoPro. These mediums carry a sense of diverse materiality and layered temporality, resembling an energy reactor. Liu Yujia then ignited her energy reactor with reassembled texts. Upon completing filming, she retreated to her study, extensively researching trans-Siberian ethnography, non-fiction about the northern territories, novels, and folktales of Northeast China. From these rich sources, Liu Yujia selected and remixed fragments to weave her "eco-fiction", in which the majestic rivers, mountains and boreal forests on the borderlands form a constant yet fluctuating stage; snow, ice and wind serve as poetic mediums that bridge the past and present; animals, plants and humans coinhabit in a pluriversal tapestry of life. Liu Yujia's fictional narratives brim with embodied and affective experiences, interweaving indigenous culture, knowledge and animist belief. These narratives not only belong to Northeast China but also to the greater northern land that spans the Eurasian continent unhindered by national borders.

From the Kunlun Mountains to the Changbai Mountains, from Xinjiang to Northeast China, from sandstorms to snowstorms, from the parched Yurungkax river to the Songhua River dotted with hydropower projects, Liu Yujia has delved into specific frontier regions over and over again, before taking her leave when the time was right. From this she has constructed a hybrid northern imaginary. Navigating between documentary and fiction, Liu Yujia attempts to transcend the territorial boundaries imposed by modern countries, invoking an ecological poetics un-suppressed by geopolitical forces. The exhibition "A Darkness Shimmering in the Light" provides the occasion for the two Asian frontiers to merge through Liu Yujia's filmic language. We, as audience, are given the opportunity to listen to various multi-species stories, sense the silent energy of the boreal landscape and compare two extractive frontiers populated by divergent multi-ethnic peoples. What we aspire to gain is by no means sensory pleasure, rather suspended questions. Can such artistic "eco-fiction" be legitimized as part of a post-anthropocentric approach? Can emotive forms, affective relationships, and embodied experiences also be recognized as forms of ecological ways of knowing? Can the frontier regions, so long regarded as mere object of extraction, be imbued with subjectivity such that it forms a vibrant network of ecological actors?

Whether we are aware of it or not, light and water have always permeated the margins of humanity, connecting the peoples and regions isolated by their border status. In this exhibition, light as both metaphor and cinematographic medium is the unifying thread that connects a series of eco-stories of affective and embodied experiences. These stories allow us to clearly see that, against the backdrop of the Changbai Mountains and on the stage of the Songhua River and Tumen River, different terrestrial beings share intersubjectivities and dependencies which not only transcend national borders but also have the potential to dispel humanity's anthropocentric delusion.

About Artist

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Liu Yujia graduated from Sichuan Fine Arts Institute and obtained her master's degree from London College of Communication, University of the Arts London. She currently lives and works in Beijing. Liu Yujia explores the blurred boundary between reality and fiction with poetic language. Considering the landscape at Asian frontiers as a vortex of suspended time and space, she weaves documentary footage, literature, ethnography, folklore and travelogue to construct films with embodied and affective experiences.

Recent solo exhibitions include Tang Contemporary Art Center, Beijing (2023, 2017, 2016); Surplus Space, Wuhan (2021); DRC No.12, Beijing (2021); Shanghai Gallery of Art, Shanghai (2015).

Group exhibitions include the Being Theoria—4th Hangzhou Triennial of Fiber Art in 2022, Hangzhou; 2022 Beijing Biennial, Beijing; Extreme Mix—2019 Guangzhou Airport Biennale, Guangzhou; Why Not Ask Again—the 11th Shanghai Biennial in 2016, Shanghai. University Art Gallery—University of Pittsburgh, USA; Moss Art Center, Virginia, USA; Ulsan Art Museum, Ulsan, Korea; HOW Art Museum, Shanghai; Power Station of Art Museum, Shanghai; chiK11 Art Museum, Shanghai; Fosun Foundation, Shanghai; He Art Museum, Shunde, Guangdong; M Woods Museum, Beijing; UCCA DUNE Art Museum, Beidaihe; Julia Stoschek Collection, Dusseldorf, Germany; White Rabbit Museum, Sydney, Australia; CFCCA, Manchester, UK; Troy House Art Foundation, London, UK; Kadist Foundation, USA; OCAT Shanghai; OCAT Shenzhen, OCAT Beijing; Lianzhou Photo Museum, Lianzhou; Museum of Contemporary Art Yinchuan, Yinchuan; Minsheng Art Museum, Shanghai; China Port Museum, etc. Her video works and films have been screened in Centre Pompidou, Paris and Hongkong M+ Museum and other museums and institutes around the world. She has been nominated for the 2018–2019 Porsche "Young Chinese Artist of the Year" Award and "2022 OCAT x KADIST Emerging Media Artist Program".

About Curator

Mia Yu is an art historian and curator. Her research-based practice centers on ecological politics, global resource frontiers, energy and mining from the perspective of New Materialism, the geopolitics and eco-poetics of Northeast Asia. She is the initiator and curator of the long-term research project Resource Frontiers: From Northeast China and Beyond.

Mia Yu's recent exhibitions and curatorial projects include "Liu Yujia: A Darkness Shimmering in the Light" (Tang Contemporary Art Center), "Empowerment" (Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg), "Li Yong: Fire Without Flame" (May Park Gallery), "Ecological Entanglements From Northeast China" (Pro Helvetia Shanghai & Wu Space), "Local Knowledges and Multiple Eco-Sensibilities" (Goethe-Institut) "Three Contested Sites—The Worldly Fables of the Long 1990s" (Times Art Center Berlin), "Resonances of One Hundred Things" (OCAT Biennale 2021), "From Vladivostok to Xishuangbanna" (Jimei x Arles International Photo Festival 2020), "Photoethics: CHINAFRICA", "Ni Jun: An Inconvenient Case" (PIFO Art Center) and "Pan Yuliang: A Journey to Silence" (Times Museum & Villa Vassiliev).

Mia Yu was the winner of the Yishu Award for Critical Writing on Contemporary Art in 2018, the recipient of the Tate Asia Research Fellowship in 2017 and the winner of the CCAA Art Critic Award in 2015. She was nominated for the Curator of the Year Award for Art Awards of China in 2018. Her research essays have been widely published in journals and anthologies including Uncooperative Contemporaries: Shanghai Art Exhibitions in 2000 published by Afterall and Bard College in 2020. Mia Yu is an adjunct professor in contemporary art and curatorial practices at China Art Academy and China Central Academy of Fine Arts. She is on the editorial board of China Contemporary Art Almanac of Peking University.