

ARTFORUM

New York Reviews

Yan Shanchun

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Yan Shanchun, *Ruangong Islet #5*, 2008, acrylic and ink on paper mounted on canvas, 39 1/2 × 59".

This exhibition featured two groups of works: acrylic paintings and copperplate etchings. Both are more or less abstract portrayals of China's West Lake Cultural Landscape, an area located west of Hangzhou, the capital of Zhejiang Province in eastern China and Yan Shanchun's native city. Designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2011, West Lake is home to numerous pagodas, temples, and gardens. UNESCO calls it an "idealized fusion between human and nature," and its carefully cultivated natural beauty has been the subject of Chinese painting and poetry for over a thousand years.

The poet Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072), for example, noted that West Lake's waters were "so clear and green they might be painted." Nearly a millennium later, Huang Zunxian (1848–1905) described it as "a vague and indistinct expanse of water and clouds / where lotus leaves merge with weeping willow branches." In the six paintings here—all standing alone in insular grandeur—there were no lotus leaves and weeping-willow branches, and the waters were not clear and green but murkily white, as though luminous. Layer after layer of painting seemed to repress what was finally expressed in the dark line of the shore: Stripped of its sacred memorabilia, the shore is reduced to a sliver of blackness.

The dark, if not troubled, side of Yan's art is even more evident in his etchings; there were thirty-five of them, from various editions, laid out like stills from a film. These colorless works are unequivocally melancholy. The places they picture—and the lake—has all but disappeared, dissolved into grayish shadow. If, as Yan claims, he is rendering his memories of the lake, his mind's eye has blurred them into oblivion.

Yan—among the first of a generation of artists who emerged from the academies when they were reopened after being closed during the Cultural Revolution—graduated from Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now the China Academy of Art) in 1982, specializing in printmaking. He was trained in traditional Chinese calligraphy and influenced by American abstract painting, for him exemplified by Mark Rothko. The Color Field master's model was evident here: The paintings were more or less the same size and structure as Rothko's—they embody Abstract Expressionism's grand format—while the etchings exemplified his moody handling. All Yan's works are intricately nuanced, the matrix of nuances creating a dreamlike effect. They hover undecidedly between raw abstraction—take, for example, the torn edges of *West Lake in My Dream # 1*, 2009—and ultrarefined image, and are all the more emotionally intriguing for being neither one nor the other.

—*Donald Kuspit*