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Chi Peng's Journey to the West - Barbara Pollack

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Chi Peng, Mountain, 2007. C-Print, 120 x 629 cm.

Westerners first encountering the works of Chinese contemporary artists often strain to find references to ancient China—temples, calligraphy, porcelain and red lanterns—as if these artifacts will make the artworks more genuinely Chinese. In reality, many Chinese contemporary artists do not find their roots in an ancient past, but look to more recent popular culture for their inspiration. Both sides—Western viewers and Chinese artists—want to appreciate the other, yet the visual conversation is fraught with confusion and misreading. Misinterpretation is the order of the day, even as Chinese contemporary art soars in popularity within the international art world.

Chi Peng is both a product of this state of confusion and a master at generating new conundrums of his own. Born in 1981, he is quite young, yet already an internationally recognized artist, known for his surrealistic photographs, altered and invigorated through the glories of Photoshop. He is too young to have been influenced by the Maoist period and far too modern to be interested in Ming furniture. Yet, perhaps in his complete assimilation into present-day China, he is the most Chinese of all artists, showing us through his photographic trickery the realities of living in contemporary Beijing.

In the past, Chi Peng created portraits of himself streaking naked through different scenes in Beijing, and sometimes multiplied these portraits into an entire army of Chi Pengs. These images proved examples of zooming into the future, with the artist literally depicted as leaving the past behind. But, in his most recent series, "The Journey to the West," Chi Peng seems to be visiting the past by drawing his inspiration from a tale that has been revisited many times before.

Journey to the West is the classic Chinese novel, originally written in the 16th century by Wu Cheng'en. The story itself, later translated as *Monkey* by renowned classicist Arthur Waley, is a fictionalized account of the travels of the monk Xuan Zang to India during the Tang Dynasty, a trip that took almost two decades (from 629 AD to 646 AD) and resulted in the return of Buddhist sutras to China—artifacts now housed in the Wild Goose Pagoda in Xian. But, despite this historic evidence, *Journey to the West* is far more fantastic than factual. It is a mythological fantasy about a monk accompanied by a monkey king, a pig and a friar, combating demons and dragons, enduring endless trials on their pilgrimage to the land of the Buddhists. It is the Chinese version of the age-old pilgrimage tale, like Boccaccio's *Decameron*, *The Wizard of Oz* or *Star Wars* are for other cultures or eras. The monkey king, trained by masters in fighting techniques and able to transform himself into infinite forms and creatures, is the hero of the tale.

Neither the original historic tale, the novel nor the translation of the novel were sources that originally inspired Chi Peng to take up this story as the basis of his new series of photographs. Like the monkey king himself, *Journey to the West* has been transformed into innumerable permutations in recent years, from the Japanese anime *Dragon Ball/Z*, to a popular television series that aired in China in 1986. Chi Peng was only five years old when he saw the series, and like many Chinese school children, he was transfixed by the array of mythological characters and by the fables of heroism. It is this version—not one more ancient or authentic—that inspired his latest series, and it is important when looking at these pictures to keep in mind that they were inspired by television.

Using Photoshop, Chi Peng is able to recreate the monkey mountain, where the Monkey King (also known as Wu Kong) was born from a rock and later ruled with all his magical powers. According to the tale and the television series, Wu Kong was trained in fighting techniques by a Daoist master, traveled at the speed of light on clouds in the sky, jumped thousands of feet in the air and possessed a 13,500 lb. rod that could be transformed to any size, for any purpose. He arrogantly sported his powers, declaring himself more important than the gods in heaven. He threatened the order of the universe until he was tricked by Buddha himself and buried under a mountain for 500 years. It is upon the Monkey King's release from imprisonment that the journey begins; he accompanies the monk as an act of redemption and his powers come in handy along the pilgrimage.

Chi Peng more than illustrates these passages, he updates them for the 21st century while retaining their mystical qualities. In one image, a landscape of stone buddhas, as wide as an ancient scroll, represents Buddha burying the Monkey King under the mountain; it is a vision almost scary in its ardent serenity. In another, the realm of women, one of the many places encountered along the journey, is set in a health club with scores of Amazons running on treadmills.

The *Journey to the West* has been interpreted and reinterpreted throughout the centuries. Today, the Monkey King today is most known to school kids as Goku, the boy who can transform himself into a magical monkey, in *Dragon Ball/Z*. It is fitting that this story should be so altered over time, since the tale itself is about transformation. The characters transform their physical appearances and at the same time, they are transformed in a spiritual sense by the trials and tribulations along their pilgrimage. And it is this focus on transformation that attracted Chi Peng to this tale, both as a child and now as a full-fledged artist.

What better role-model for an artist than the Monkey King, who can change himself in flash into anything that he imagines? What better story to use as a foundation for an art career than this *Journey to the West*, in which the power of metamorphosis allows the characters to supersede all their enemies? It seems almost too perfect a match for an artist like Chi Peng who uses the wonders of modern technology to generate his magical images. Indeed, in this series,

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the images are magical in two ways. First, they appear to be made from magic, as the artist seamlessly blends monkeys and monsters and Buddhas and modern settings together into formats reminiscent of ancient scroll paintings. But, they also seem magical in content, a homage to magic as the primary tool in a contemporary artist's work room.

Of course, Chi Peng, like so many modern artists today, has no workroom. Just a computer stationed in a corner of his living room. It is on this illuminated screen that he is able to conjure up all sorts of landscapes. It is liberating, not confining, in that anything he imagines he can bring to life with a flick of a mouse. We know these works must be labor-intensive, but they seem carefree and playful. We know these works could only be created with the latest technology, yet they seem to be the best means to bring this ancient story to life. Like the Monkey King's rod, which can expand to the size of towering pillar or contract to the size of sewing needle, Chi Peng's use of Photoshop is so fluent that it makes you wonder if his mouse is a magic wand. In his hands, the Journey to the West becomes the quintessential story of China today, ever changing and reinventing itself as a country venturing forward into the 21st century.

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