

# The Beauty of Construction Garbage: A Conversation with Artist Yao Lu<sup>1</sup>

Yang Jing<sup>1</sup>

*Yao Lu is a renowned Chinese photographer based in Beijing. He studied at Central Academy of Fine Arts, China and Queensland College of Art, Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia. Since 2006 he has created a large series of works in which he expresses a sarcastic contradiction between the idyllic imagery of Chinese Mountain-and-Water painting and garbage from contemporary urban construction, revealing the effects of the mass urbanization process in China. In 2008 he won the Paris Photo BMW Prize for contemporary photography, and was shortlisted for the prestigious Prix Pictet 2009.*

Yang Jing: Thanks for accepting my interview. How did urban construction garbage first enter your view?

Yao Lu: I started to pay attention on construction garbage from 2004. At that time, as preparation for the Beijing Olympic Games, there was a new round of large scale construction in Beijing. Since 2004, I saw a lot of construction sites near CAFA. The mounds of earth covered by dustproof nets caught my eyes, because mounds looked like mountains and its green colour naturally reminded me of the green and blue landscape painting. Not only myself, but I suppose that whoever who passed by CAFA and saw these mounds of earth covered by dustproof nets would connect them with Chinese classical Mountain-and-Water painting. I was living at CAFA then and I went to take photos of those mounds of earth in different seasons. Later, I wrote in an essay that at first I just planned to combine the mounds that I photographed and make images in the pattern of Mountain-and-Water paintings. Photography is documentary, it is also conceptual — reorganizing the things we saw and editing them creates an illusion of time and space, so people can see both realistic and unrealistic images. The expanded functions of photography offered more possibilities to my work.

When I tried to make use of construction debris, documentary photography didn't work. Since it is a kind of reorganization, it is related to postmodern methods, such as copying, transplanting, imitating and parodying. Digital technology played the most significant role. In those years, computer image processing technology was developing quickly. Meanwhile, my master of computer technology and ideas about this subject were also improving. After shooting those mounds of earth for about one and a half years, I felt more confident with my computer technology and accumulated enough source material. I put aside two other projects and concentrated on this subject. To be exact, at the end of 2006, after an exhibition, *The Post Fact: Images of*

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Yao Lu & Wang Chuan, I immediately started to work on this project, and in 2007 the first works came out.

Yang Jing: Your works attracted a broad attention in art circles. Some critics named them “Chinese Landscapes” while some called them “New Mountain and Water”. I saw online that these photos were also described as “Debris Landscapes”. Behind those impressive images, your works conveyed multiple meaning, far beyond the issue of construction waste. Were you already aware of that at the beginning of your work?

Yao Lu: The Chinese critic Gu Zheng used the phrase “Chinese Landscapes”. Later, another critic Feng Boyi applied the term “New Mountain and Water”. In fact, I didn’t think too much about this at first. I was just focused on the shape of the mounds of earth which looked like the mountains in Chinese classical landscape paintings. However, as these big green mounds of earth are all urban construction garbage, as the work developed I became more aware of the connection between these mounds and contemporary Beijing where demolition, construction, and relocation were all the time going on and construction debris was seen everywhere. I was born and brought up in Beijing. I witnessed too many Hu-Tongs being demolished and courtyard houses being torn down. I saw so many ruins. In my eyes, these mounds of earth were not waste; they were the remains of disappeared history, culture and memory. So, when I was working on this series, I had a heavy feeling. I understood that this situation was due to the development of the country and we can’t stop that. But when I saw that traditional culture and history were destroyed during such fast development, I felt lost. Meanwhile, the huge amount of construction garbage everywhere also told that the process of urbanization was degrading the urban environment. These concerns were entangled together, and it is hard to figure out which came first and which second.



*Dwelling in the Mountain Fuchun, Chromogenic print, 2008, courtesy of the artist.*

Yang Jing: The critics mentioned the connection between your works and the paintings of the Song Dynasty. Is there some special reason for you favouring Song Painting?

Yao Lu: There was no special sense of direction. First of all, I have a deep interest in

Chinese traditional culture. This is rooted in my education and background growing up. I paid attention to traditional religion and architecture when I was studying art, but without deep thinking about how to transform traditional painting into my own language. Maybe this was like fermentation? At a certain moment, when all internal and external conditions are ripe enough, creativity wakes up and grows. I never expected that my photographic work could directly connect with Chinese classical landscape painting. Speaking frankly, my knowledge of traditional Mountain-and-Water painting is limited even though I've majored in art. People say that my works imitate the painting of the Song Dynasty, but that is not a very clear idea. Is it the Mountain-and-Water painting? Or is it the Mountain-and-Water painting of the Song Dynasty? Or is it green and blue landscape painting? So, the connection is not so strict. Some works mimic green and blue landscape painting; some are more like ink and water landscape painting. I just borrowed certain concepts, the imagery of classical landscape painting and its visual elements. I borrowed them for my own use. In fact, copying, transplanting, imitating and parodying are all popular methods in contemporary art.



*Cranes Squawking on the Deserted Hill, Chromogenic print, 2010, courtesy of the artist.*

Yang Jing: Your main interest was not rebuilding or representing the classical landscape painting, but creating a new work.

Yao Lu: In other words, sometimes I say that I was rebuilding; but not rebuilding the brushstroke and ink work, instead, I was rebuilding the image pattern, in order to tell my story. In other words, I just used the image style of landscape painting for my own expression.

Yang Jing: Can you tell me something about the use of technology and the process?

Yao Lu: It was the application of digital technology. I first shot a lot of raw material on construction sites. When I took photos, I never considered the composition; I was more focused on the shape of those mounds of earth, the angle and some small details. I saved all these materials in my computer. Then, I edited these materials in Adobe Photoshop. The rebuilding of mounds of earth was not like in architectural photos that are quite strict. The editing of mounds of earth was easier. After, I erased the excess parts to make it look natural. These are very basic technologies. Nothing was technically complex. Some people thought I constructed the scene and shot it, or some thought I found such a perfect place and shot there, but neither was true.

Yang Jing: I found the titles of these works very interesting. How did you find right titles for these works?

Yao Lu: there was a lot of homework. I bought a lot of books of Chinese classical landscape painting, and among them one is a study of the titles of landscape paintings. According to my point of view, since I borrowed the image pattern of classical paintings, I would rather make the work look real. The “real” that is “*Di-Dao*” in Beijing dialect means close to the taste of the original work. The more similar to the original Mountain-and-Water painting, the more impressive the contradiction I was expressing. If I had just simply borrowed the title from a classical landscape painting, the meaning would not be fully revealed. To take an example, when we watch Hong Kong historical dramas, in a drama about the Qing Dynasty, the hats and costume are not Qing style, so it looks like a so-called “Chinatown Style”, and that feels strange and annoying. However, when we watch CCTV’s historical dramas, we see that they really take care about all the details of the costumes and scenes — we feel that the work has been done well. In my work, I paid a lot of attention to these details. My view was integrated in the antique taste. The more genuine the work I did, the more impressive the contradiction was.

Yang Jing: For example, I am interested in the title *Early Spring on Lake Dong Ting*. Because *Early Spring on Lake Dong Ting* was not recorded in catalogues of Chinese ancient landscape paintings, so your work was not an imitation of any of these works. How did you get the idea of the title?

Yao Lu: I felt quite interested in the term “spring” in this typical genre of classical landscape painting. I made a series, including four works — *Early Spring on Lake Dong Ting*, *Mountain and Straw Houses in the Summer*, *View of Autumn Mountains in the Distance* and *Birds and Snow in the Cold Dusk*, to represent the landscapes of four seasons. In this way, my works had a sense of a series and became closer to antique artistic taste.

Yang Jing: How long did you work under the subject of “Chinese Landscapes”? Are you still going on now?

Yao Lu: I started from the end of 2006. Generally, every year, I made a series. Then I stopped this subject in 2013 or 2014. There were in total 35 or 36 works under this subject. Afterwards, I felt the repetition of language so I decided to stop. In fact, the works made after 2013 were already different in content and form. But I think these changes in content and form are still superficial - a more profound breakthrough has not yet been reached.

Yang Jing: How about the exhibitions and the awards for the works on this subject?

Yao Lu: In 2007, after the first two photos came out, I sent my works to 798 Photo Gallery and they were exhibited at the 2007 China Art Exposition. These works attracted a broad attention. People began to order and collect my works. At the end of 2007, I began to think about my solo exhibition. In March 2008 I went to Houston for the Fotofest International Houston Current Perspectives. Even before that, Wendy Watriss, a famous photographer and curator, had started to pay some attention to my series. In Houston, my works obtained more international attention, which was an encouragement for me. After returning to China, I continued to work under this subject. Soon I had already 14 works, including eight works that had been previously exhibited. So in June, 2008, I had my solo exhibition at 798 Photo Gallery in Beijing. Then, in November, 2008, my works went to PARISPHOTO. One day my agency called me and told me that I had been awarded the 2008 BMW-Paris Photo Prize for Contemporary Photography. Later, I gradually realized the value of this award. Later, I was shortlisted for the Prix Pictet 2009. There were 12 shortlisted artists, including Andreas Gursky and Edward Burtynsky. I went to the ceremony and I was happy to share a stage with Gursky. That year's award went to a UK based artist, Nadav Kander. His photo series *Yangtze River* was very elegant and dreamlike. Kofi Annan was the presenter for that year, as I remember. Anyway, under the sponsorship of galleries, my work went forward smoothly. Almost every year I presented a group of new works. However, over the course of the last few years I have gradually felt there was certain inertia in my work on this subject. I feel that they looked too easy and skilful, which is not a good sign for art creation. If I look back, I feel I was rather lucky. After the economic depression in 2010, Chinese contemporary art has also entered a hard time. It has been more difficult for the artists to have their work exhibited and collected since then.

Yang Jing: How many copies did you make of each work?

Yao Lu: My works are generally in two formats. The big one is suitable for galleries and the small one for individual collectors. Generally, eight copies in large format, and ten in small format.

Yang Jing: Could you say something about your current series. It looks different from previous works.

Yao Lu: Recently, I have been working on this series. Beijing is now filled with fliers — advertising for things like apartment renting, opening locks, making false papers and unclogging drains. They are in the stairways of every apartment building. This is an interesting visual sign of Chinese society and the economy. I photographed a lot of fliers. I used Adobe Photoshop's matting tools to remove the background of these images and then employed these fliers as brushstroke to rebuild a landscape painting. So, this series is still related to Chinese classical landscape painting. By now, I have completed only one piece. I'll finish the whole series. But I don't know if this series can be as impressive as my previous works.

Yang Jing: How do you understand classical Mountain-and-Water painting? What do you think of Chinese classical landscape painting and of Western landscape painting?

Yao Lu: I didn't know too much about Chinese Mountain-and-Water painting. Chinese Mountain-and-Water painting has its unique language, different from Western landscape painting which is based on the depiction of real landscape and purposed on express the sublime or the beauty in nature and the artists' adoration of it. Of course, we also read the metaphysical dimension from works by Caspar David Friedrich and we easily feel the social political concern in the works by Levitan and Shishkin. For example, the *Vladimirka* by Levitan was a path of exile, which had deep political implication. But Chinese Mountain-and-Water painting totally reorganizes the visual elements of nature. It depicts the artists' idealism instead of the real landscape. Instead of glorifying the sublime or beauty of nature, Chinese artists were focused on expressing the idea of disengagement. The artists wanted to find a feeling of breathing with the mountains and waters. This somehow is close to our situation in today's China. When we are here, we might want to retreat to the temples and live as monks because we dream of being disengaged. But if we really became monks, we might want to come back to this secular life. In traditional Chinese society, literati always swayed between engagement and disengagement. Mountain-and-Water painting is the depiction of their emotion. Generally, the figurative characteristic of Western traditional landscape painting is consistent with their culture; the imagery of Chinese landscape painting is rooted in our culture. The difference is very interesting.

Yang Jing: Yes, Chinese Mountain-and-Water painting is distant from real natural landscapes. Chinese ancient culture emphasized the integrity of heaven and human beings, which means respecting the law of nature and reaching the harmony between humanity and nature. From today's point of view, that was ecological awareness. But this existed only as idealism. In reality, low productivity resulted in the yield of the land being very small. To feed the increasing population, Chinese farmers kept burning the virgin forests for rice cultivation. This situation became more severe after the Song Dynasty. So, by the end of the feudal era, the destruction of forests and the desertification of land were already very severe. But strangely, in Chinese traditional Mountain-and-Water painting, there was never any depiction of the destruction of nature. The Chinese artists never even painted these not-so-pleasing landscapes,

such as desert, wetland or wilderness. They painted only the idyllic illusion.

Yao Lu: Of course we didn't see many subjects for depicting the destruction of nature in ancient times. The more recent history of the exploitation and development has become the history of the destruction of nature. Of course, there is no need to condemn ancient people, since as I have said, hundreds or thousands of years ago human beings had little knowledge about the need for environmental protection because the environment was not being so much destroyed. The concept of ecology didn't emerge until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and nor did environmentalism prevail as a major concern until the 1960s. Human beings learnt the lesson only after many painful experiences. In ancient China, there were certain rules, such as "not catching the fish by draining the pool" and "not cutting off the forest without replanting trees", which showed primitive ecological awareness, I believe. However, it is also possible that it came from certain religious attitudes. Anyway, there was no systematic and profound knowledge of ecology. The destruction of nature was always going on. I don't know if this happened all over the world. Anyway, the destruction of nature in the last 500 years surpassed all past centuries. And the destruction in the last fifty years has surpassed all of the destruction of the previous 500 years. In a nutshell, the population explosion and the increasing need for resources together with the fast improving productivity have magnified the destruction of nature in an unprecedented way.

Looking back at traditional Chinese Mountain-and-Water paintings, there was no depiction of human beings as being in conflict with the landscape or even of the landscape that was not suitable for living in, such as desert, swamp or any wilderness. I never thought about this before, but I think what you mentioned is very important and interesting. In some paintings, such as *Lady Wen's Return to Han*, there was the depiction of desert, but that was only the background of the historical painting, to emphasize the atmosphere. This speaks, from another perspective, that Chinese Mountain-and-Water painting was aloof from the real world. Instead of depicting nature, the artists were expressing their spiritual pursuit. That's why they didn't depict those landscapes, nor did it depict the destruction of nature. Of course, this is from my intuitive understanding. My borrowing of the image pattern of the Mountain-and-Water painting also represented my understanding of Chinese classical landscape painting. First, I was focused on making my pictures look beautiful. The more beautiful they looked, the more vivid was ugly reality revealed. The other side of beauty is ugliness. So, the creation of contrast was significant; only through strong contrast was I able to express my idea.

Yan Jing: At the first glance at your photos, the audience might think that this is about the waste problem in the urban environment. But we see that this is not all you want to speak about. The multidimensional meanings make your work very attractive. The interpretation of your work becomes an ongoing process.

Yao Lu: Yes, I might want to say more. In the exhibition hall, the first image the

audience sees is landscape painting; when they walk closer, they see construction sites and debris. This optical illusion is how my work functions. This is what I want to say: looking from far is beautiful, looking closely is ugly. In fact, this is beyond the protection of the urban environment. It carries the meaning of the destruction of tradition, the thinking of development and preservation. This is the meaning carried by these images. Living in Beijing, the most heartbreaking thing I experienced is that every day I see in Beijing the disappearance of old tradition and memory. It took several hundred years to build an ancient building, but today it's demolished in one hour. People very often demolished old buildings, but after one or two years they actually rebuilt those old buildings. There is no meaning in that, because that rebuilt one is a fake. This is stupid and hypocritical. This has happened many times in Beijing, as well as all over the country. Many ancient buildings are demolished and many fake antiquities are built. If demolishing the old buildings is stupid, rebuilding them is expressing once again how stupid their behaviour is. I felt so depressed by this. This is what I want to express: our attitude to tradition and culture. I think this conflict between development and preservation exists all over the world, also in Western countries, but we need to have a rational and wise solution to reach a balance. I think that China has done worse than many other countries.

Yang Jing: Ecology means more than the relation between human beings and nature. It includes the connection between the human being and his social environment, history and culture. The dustproof nets in your work emphasized the concealment. Why is it necessary to conceal the ugliness beneath? It is very critical.

Yao Lu: I didn't summarize this. Gu Zheng's article mentioned this. Concealment is to hide the ugly truth. It seems that the net covered the ugliness, but in fact it only exposed it more. His comment combed the logic of this concealment. There is a sentence in his article that in the greenness the concealed and the unconcealable formed a tension. The tension between concealment and exposure seems to be exactly China's present reality. Concealment is the essence of reality. The instinctive and emotional expression become clear through the critic's summary.

Yang Jing: The issues you revealed are shocking. Besides its influence in art circles, your work was widely reported by the mass media. Did you have some interaction with the media? Are you aware of the broad social influence generated by your work?

Yao Lu: Yes, many media interviewed me. I was also invited to forums and seminars. For example, I was invited to attend the Summer Davos Forum 2013. At first I felt surprised. The Davos Forum was an economic forum — why would the organizers like to invite an artist? Later I got to know that each year the Davos Forum invites some artists. The theme of the 2013 Summer Davos Forum was "Meeting the Innovation Imperative". Over the course of three days there were many forums and each lasted 45 minutes. I went to several forums associated with my concern and work. I found that my works were involved in the recent topics of this international



economic forum, such as climate change, sustainability, diversity, the environment and politics, and development and preservation. These topics at Davos covered most issues that we consider deeply today. For instance, sustainability is not only a concept in environmental and ecological science; it is involved with politics, technology, and culture. It is a broad idea.

In September 2010, at the Shanghai Himalayas Art Museum, there was an exhibition, *UPDATING CHINA: Art and Architecture Exhibition on Sustainable Urban Development in China*. It was a comprehensive architecture and art exhibition focused on sustainable urban development. The topic of the exhibition includes two aspects: the “self-renewal of China” which means the constant self-adjustment of our cities, environment, people’s living status, life style, and art and culture, and the “renewal of ideas” which means how the world can better understand and evaluate China’s development and construction. There were many architects, designers and artists. I was one of them. I remember one architect presented how to use new architectural materials to build in an environmentally friendly way. In 2011 I was invited to an exhibition “Come to Close Quarters” at the China International Real Estate & Architectural Technology Fair. It was a big scale and comprehensive fair. This exhibition was outside the conventional art venue. There were many artists whose work related to urbanization, including among them Zhang Dali, Huang Rui and others. Then, in 2011, my work also was included in “10 Climate Stories”, an exhibition at the Science Museum in London. I travelled to London and I saw my work, as one of the 10 stories, exhibited in the Exhibition Hall of the Industrial Revolution at the Science Museum. Nowadays, a lot of museums in the UK and the USA hold exhibitions in a fixed exhibition space. For example, there can be a water and ink art exhibition in the exhibition halls of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Of course the use of the exhibition space must make the connection between the original exhibition space and the new exhibition. That is very interesting.

Yang Jing: These are meaningful. Do you recognize that these seminars and forums as the sign of your work going beyond the border of art and entering other fields?

Yao Lu: I would say it was not my work going beyond the contemporary art. I think contemporary art has gone beyond the conventional venues. Contemporary art should have multiple functions. Instead of being put on the walls in galleries and appreciated by audiences, it is more like an action and a voice. This is my perspective of contemporary art. Of course, we still need to pay attention to the image — the vehicle of the artistic idea. It depends on how we understand the image; it can be exhibited as an art piece in gallery, but if you take it from the context of gallery, it becomes an issue. Its contemporaneity makes it a “public” and “present” issue. Furthermore, I think contemporary art should be appreciated and interpreted by all audiences. Abstraction belongs to high modernism. Since POP art, Western art has become more public — everyone can participate in it. Contemporary art follows this trend. It takes the interactivity, participation, topicality, and multifold meanings for

interpretation as its core values. Why have many Western critics considered Chinese contemporary art vivid and Chinese artists so active? Because China is vivid: there are a lot of tensions and conflicts and everything is changing fast. This is good resource for contemporary artists. American art in the 1960s and 1970s, under those social turbulences of anti-war protests, the civil rights movement and feminism, was also vivid. China is a developing country, the word “developing” means changing. I often feel lucky to be living in contemporary China, as its life has offered me a lot of opportunities and resources even though sometimes I feel sad about the messy environment we live in. Maybe for an artist, it is not a bad thing.

Yang Jing: Many contemporary art works are question oriented: they have an inherent conflict with the reality. In a society, if everything is running smoothly and perfectly — of course that is not possible in the real world — there would be no tensions to be revealed in art.

Yao Lu: Contemporary artists need to be concerned with the conflict and tension. I don't say that artists must have a strong sense of social responsibility, but the nature of contemporary art decides that it often triggers contentious topics. If an art work is only a painting, if it can't trigger topic and discussion, it will be forgotten soon. If there is a topic, argument and conflict, it can go on. But the artists must be very careful of their medium, the artful expression. We are not like the other political and social activists, because we have our own way to reveal the problems and facilitate the topical discussion, and it must respect the rule of visuality.

Yang Jing: This is about the core and the expansion of contemporary art. The core is still aesthetic and visual expression. But meanwhile it has also expanded into many social fields. Contemporary art is focused on social engagement, including becoming involved in environmental issues, as we have said. Many artists seem to employ the mediums of photography and video. I would like to hear your opinion about the reasons behind that.

Yao Lu: Why are photography and video so popular? I think it is due to the development of materials and technology. As a photography teacher, I consider the development and popularization of digital technology as the decisive factor. The artist working before the digital era also wanted to use photography, but technically it was not so easy. In fact, the invention of photography was to find an easy tool to mimic and represent reality, because painting was so difficult and slow. The theory of photography was formulated several hundred years ago. In Da Vinci's time somebody in Europe already articulated the principle of taking photographs. At that time, however, there was no chemical industry, consequently no proper materials to make use of. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the development of modern chemistry provided the people with proper chemical materials, which led to the birth of photography. Today's digital photography is the same. Conventional photography was technically demanding, such as in the technique of using the dark room. Nowadays, with the better digital

cameras and computer software, we just need to click buttons. The documentary nature of photography, the powerful capability of representing reality, is its most distinct advantage. This tells how photography is accepted by the audience. That also tells why photography and video art are more involve in the expression of social issues. In addition, the large format of ink jet printing also changed the way of seeing and magnified the power of image. When a gigantic photo is printed and exhibited in the hall, it is so impressive. This totally changed the way of seeing. It is different from Henri Cartier-Bresson's time in which the small framed photo made "seeing" such a private behaviour in a private space. This also influences the audience's acceptance.

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<sup>i</sup> This interview with Yao Lu was conducted on 4 March, 2016. The interview was originally in Chinese and translated into English by the author. The Chinese transcript was reviewed and approved by artist Yao Lu and kept in the possession of the author.