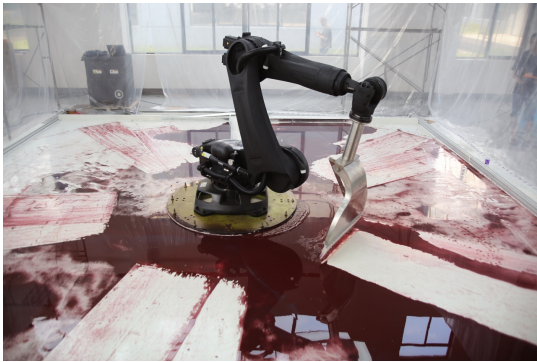


SEANKELLY

Wong, Ryan. "New Art from China Renders Local Histories Fantastic, Futuristic and Bloody," *Hyperallergic*, January 11, 2017.

HYPERALLERGIC

New Art from China Renders Local Histories Fantastic, Futuristic, and Bloody



In the corner of a small gallery on an upper floor of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, you are immersed in a bloody, bizarre, and strangely emotional tableau. Inside a floor-to-ceiling acrylic cage, a black robotic arm twirls around, sweeping bloody residue on the floor towards itself. Just as the arm's plastic flap cleans one area, more liquid oozes out elsewhere. The artists Sun Yuan and Peng Yu have given the poor robot an impossible job — the piece, called "Can't Help Myself," dooms the arm to this repetitive, hopeless, horrific task. The arm uses sensors to choose where it will sweep next, but at times it whirls and flails as if overwhelmed, giving the arm an eerily humanoid feel.

The installation is a highlight of *Tales of Our Time*, a dynamic and tightly curated exhibition at the Guggenheim. This robotic arm could be an icon for the present moment. It makes tangible, for our globalized and industrialized world, the metaphor of "clean hands." Do we identify with the robot and its attempt to make order out of the violent mess around it? (Isn't this how it feels to respond to each new appointment by the president-elect, each white power rally?) Or is the robot simply there to do what most refuse to, performing the messy labor of waste management that allows our societies to function?

It's a shock for anyone coming to the Guggenheim expecting to kick back with Kandinsky and Cézanne. *Tales of Our Time* is a small but ambitious show, presenting just seven artists or collectives, with nine works in total. Each of these thoughtful, well-realized works offers an investigation into global politics, the contemporary as historical, and environmental collapse, with room to laugh, rest, and think in between.

The nine works are commissions, generated after a series of studio visits with emerging and mid-career Chinese artists by curators Xiaoyu Weng and Hou Hanru. The commissions were paid for by a major grant from the Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation, and the museum will acquire all of them. The exhibition, then, is like a laboratory: these works are brand new, and are being stamped into the DNA of the Guggenheim.



Chia-En Jao, "Taxi" (2016)

The artist Chia-En Jao, who lives and works in Taipei, created his deceptively simple *Taxi* films with cab drivers as he visited sites of colonial history around Taiwan. Any New Yorker who has chatted with a cab driver knows that exploring our contested neighborhoods and histories starts on the ride there. In one interview, a driver excitedly describes his firearms, explosives, and parachuting training in the military. When Jao asks what all of it was for, the cab driver talks about the plot to invade the mainland in the late 1960s. We glimpse, in his telling, an alternate history unfold, one in which Taiwan defeats the People's Republic of China (PRC) and this muscular and garrulous man might be a war hero. Other drivers complain about mainlanders or share their disgust for Taiwanese politics — it's vox populi, history lesson, and talk show in one.

The politics of the East China Sea appear again in Tsang Kin-Wah's "In The End Is The Word," which illustrates a fictional war. In a mural-sized animation, battleships fight over the Diaoyu (or, according to Japan, Senkaku) Islands. In real life, the islands have been disputed fiercely between the PRC, Taiwan, and Japan since oil reserves were discovered there in the late 1960s. In Tsang's video, just at the battle's peak, a stream of words appears on the horizon and floods onto the floor of the gallery via powerful overhead projectors. It's a stunning visual effect, and the sentence fragments — e.g. "the infinite slippage" and "being there at the right" — speak to the posturing and emptiness of diplomatic rhetoric.



Tsang Kin-Wah, "In the End is the Word" (2016)

Sun Xun places the landscape of his hometown of Fuxin into a fantastical mural and animated video where multiple histories, real and imagined, collide. Like William Kentridge's animated meditations on the landscape and industry of South Africa, Sun's "Mythological Time" uses heavy brushstrokes and visual rhymes to metamorphose the landscape and its inhabitants. Set to grand, operatic music, we watch crows fly out of men's chests and tanks roll across mountains; a giraffe becomes a tomb which becomes a communist sculpture; a landscape erodes in the rain. In Sun's mythical take, industrialization seems to turn us not forward into a glittering future, but backward into tombs, animals, and the elements.

Zhou Tao's film "Land of the Throat" also shows violently remade landscapes, but in a poetic, futuristic tone. You sit in the bowl of a curved floor, with the two-channel film projected on either side. The room setup reflects the Pearl River Delta seen in Zhou's camera — abandoned industrial waste, manmade craters. He films them at night or dusk, capturing sleeping workers and animals scurrying around the sites. Shown in these quiet hours, the land is desolate, moonlike. You feel like an alien visitor watching a wasted earth.



Still from Zhou Tao, "The Land of the Throat" (2016)

While Zhou's film looks at the excesses of contemporary society, Kan Xuanunearths civilizations past. She took a five-month journey across the plateaus of Central Asia searching for remnants of ancient settlements. Her snapshots of those sites are compiled into stop-motion videos, which are hung in the gallery like still photographs. In these 13 videos, the landscapes seem to breathe and pulse, as if being resuscitated.

Nearby, the Yangjiang Group has set up a social space, a riff on the Chinese garden. They serve tea daily, inviting conversation around a series of low tables, with views of the Guggenheim's outdoor greenery. There is also a station to test your blood pressure before and after visiting, making you question whether the tranquility of the space actually serves a utilitarian, biometric purpose. Who is collecting the data? Are we paying for the tea with our personal information, our vital signs?

As with many of the works in the exhibition, the garden points to an uneasy tension between personal choices and larger power dynamics. A taxi ride is an invitation to ponder history, a group of islands suggests war. If our globalized, industrialized, war-prone world seems incomprehensible, these artists remind us there are at least clues to understanding the places we visit.