

Art Reviews: Becoming Landscape, Ma Yongfeng

by Lee Ambrozy

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The video section of Ma Yongfeng's solo exhibition *Origin of the Species* captures animals in Beijing Zoo as they fidget behind bars – framing pandas, flamingos and monkeys in a circular frame evocative of Song dynasty art. They are restless yet cuddly, anxious but resigned to their containment. Taking in Ma's pacing animals from the hard bench in the dark, cavernous exhibition space, the word "cagey" takes on a new meaning.

The second section is a subtle amalgam of media – hand-painted walls and trees, and digitally manipulated elements – resulting in enormous prints of what look like zoo "habitats."

Conceptual photography has been foundering recently in Beijing, and Ma's exhibition succeeds as more than tedious social commentary that equates the human condition with animal captivity. Masterfully done, Ma's work is indistinguishable from reality. Though at first their value seems dubious, the virtue lies in how they deconstruct the art viewing experience. They come alive the moment you stand before them and wonder if the absent animal is really you.

That's Beijing