

Ma Yongfeng: Becoming Landscape

By David Thorp

Ma Yongfeng's recent video work *Beijing Zoological Garden* marks a departure from his earlier video pieces and moves into a realm that is more reflective. In this video Ma Yongfeng wanders with his camera through the Beijing Zoo filming the animals in their various enclosures. The film is shown as a circular image, as if through the lens of a *camera obscura*, and this emphasises the viewer's detachment from the scenes portrayed. As he drifts around the Zoo, Ma Yongfeng observes and records the movements of the animals and their spectators, creating a mysterious atmosphere that explores the artificial habitat of the animals in their man made shelters. Boundaries shift between animal and human. Man watches the animals, the animals watch man in an artificial environment in which species are saved from the excesses of the outside world.

It is not unusual for contemporary artist to use animals in their work. Artists have adopted the persona of explorer, anthropologist, hunter and shaman in their analysis of the relationship between man and animal in art. Some have employed the mannerisms of animals in an attempt to explore their inner animal nature, while others use the animal as metaphor for the 'other', experimenting with bizarre forms of communication. In contemporary art, the animal can become a symbol of the alienation between man and the natural world, as man seeks a deeper understanding of what it means to be human. In the world of the individual, the animal offers a social alternative.

Ma Yongfeng has not always been so accommodating towards animals. In his earlier video work *Swirl* (2003) six goldfish are subjected to a fifteen minute wash cycle in the drum of a washing machine. Another circular image, but apparently unrelated to that from *Beijing Zoological Garden*, *Swirl* records dispassionately the plight of the fish. It has been read as a metaphor for torture or possibly, more existentially, as a commentary upon the artist's existence. Ma Yongfeng's interest in animals as a symbolic representation of the human condition reinforces the feeling of alienation and ineffectiveness that is the plight of modern humans.

Now Ma Yongfeng is making use of the other side of the symbolic human/animal equation. The absence of animals has become the subject of his new series of photographs *The Origin of the Species*. The Beijing Zoo is once again the setting for these works that show images of the animal enclosures without the animals in them. The absence of the animals intensifies the viewers' sense of animal presence but also creates a highly theatrical tableaux. These animal areas are based on the imaginary environment of the creature's habitat and like a stage set have a painted back drop that is intended to depict the natural environment of the animal as well as referring to traditional

Chinese bird-and-flower scroll paintings. The overall effect is intensely theatrical and, whether deliberate or not, the lone tree for the animals to climb that stands in the centre of each closure and each photograph is reminiscent of the imagery of Samuel Beckett and the set for *Waiting for Godot* in which a lone tree stands bleakly in the barren landscape while around it the characters in the play grapple with the essential meaninglessness of life.

Ecologists argue that China's development into an intensely urban orientated society is wreaking destruction upon the country's fauna, Ma Yongfeng's empty tableaux suggest that even the animals in the zoo have disappeared. What is left behind is man made, it relates to nature but it is stripped of natural growth and has become a pastiche of the natural environment. In Ma Yongfeng's hands the emptiness of the animal pen and the absence of the animal itself evokes a sense of loss for the spectator. Not in a sentimental way in which a child might miss a small furry creature that has run away but in the manner in which modern drama is able to induce a feeling of emptiness that accompanies an awareness of self.

David Thorp was active in the development of the contemporary art scene in the East End of London. In 1992 he became Director of the South London Gallery. From 2001-2004, he was Curator of Contemporary Projects at the Henry Moore Foundation and is now an independent curator.