

## Yun-Fei Ji

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

Earlier this season, reviewing Sze Tsung Leong's photographs of today's China, I speculated that the title of his recent series "History Images," 2002-2005, referred to the old academic genre of history painting. I was making the point that Leong's apparently documentary records are deeply informed in aesthetic terms, but the argument could as easily have run the other way: The title could equally imply that ambitious art should address far-reaching events, whether past



Yun-Fei Ji, *Elements of Abandoned Houses Near Fengjie, 2005*, mineral pigments and ink on mulberry paper, 42 1/2 x 34 1/2".

or present — and Leong's concern is clearly with the present. Modern art has an ambivalence, of f-again-on-again relationship with the world's actualities, and has a long tradition of claims to the right to ignore them. But what is happening in China is overpowering, and artists like Leong, and now Yun-Fei Ji, evidently feel compelled to take account of it.

Ji's recent show "Water That Floats the Boar Can Also Sink It" takes as its subject the building of the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze, or, rather, not the dam itself—no images glorify the construction—but its effects: Some two million people will in time be displaced as the waters rise and flood the towns, villages, and countryside around the river. Ji's large-scale drawings, based on library research and on the artist's travel in the area, describe this migration in terms both physical and psychic, emphasizing the loss in departure, the literal haunting of the travelers by what they leave behind. Interestingly, if Leong chose to justify his descriptive approach through verbal allusion with a premodern body of art, Ji looks back, though his reference is more intrinsic to his work: The visual style of his pictures is based on the long tradition of Chinese landscape painting, notably of the Song dynasty, roughly between seven hundred and one thousand years ago. Even his media and ground—ink and mineral pigments on mulberry paper—conspire to give the drawings an aged look. In fact, part of their impact derives from their deliberate anachronisms, the glimpses of modern buildings and technologies in an otherwise ancient scene.

In an interview with John Yau, Ji spoke of the hierarchic order of Song painting, its symbolic retention of the imperial government of the time. To the Western eye, though, Ji's images are striking exactly for their lack of hierarchy — for their leveling arrangement of figure and ground. People and land are of equal significance, just part of an overall picture. In *Last Days Before the Flood*, 2006, for example, trees, hills, and roads form a rhythmic patchwork in which—especially given that the drawing is over six feet tall—we have to look to find the family with their bicycle way low in the view, and then the scattering of others who begin to emerge around them: a loaded handcart, a man with his belongings in a pannier on his back (he could have been drawn centuries ago), a couple of trucks, all just as heavily burdened. Everyone is leaving, and what they are leaving is a rich landscape of woods and ridges, buildings old and new, terraced fields and steep scarps, the traces of ages of being lived in. A predominant purple cast to the landscape is part of its sense of misty distance, but picturesque recession here is in fact quite compressed; Ji's way of structuring his pictures bows as much toward abstraction, and awareness of the flatness of the picture plane, as the illusion of depth. And this sense that a landscape follows a patterned all-over composition contributes to its seductive beauty, and also to the feeling that its destruction is tragic.

—David Frankel