

The Guardian



Interview

Yang Fudong's best photograph: seven intellectuals in a boat suspended in the air

By *Jamie Fullerton and Paula Jin*

'We found a boat-lifting machine and asked the actors to jump aboard, then set the mechanism in motion as we started to shoot'

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This shot was taken in 2006 in Shandong province, near the port city of Weihai – I was there to film the fourth instalment of a five-hour video work, *Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest*.

The film is based on the third-century fable of the seven sages: seven young people who sought to escape corrupt court politics and together left the city in search of their future. The theme of the instalment was “a small island on the sea of belief”. As the seven city dwellers try out life as fishermen, the narrative explores the tension between their dual identities.

I'd never been to Weihai, but intuitively opted to shoot there. We spent about a month on location, doing a couple of three- to four-day shoots on the beach.

This particular day was strenuous, a bit like working on a construction site: shooting a film isn't that different from manual labour. We started at six in the morning. The actors worked exactly as the local fishermen do, labouring in the heat to load and unload fish from boats and transport their luggage.

We didn't have a clear script – that isn't how I work. I usually start with a vague idea and improvise with whatever I find on site. We happened upon a boat-lifting machine; some locals explained they used it to hoist vessels to the shore so they could unload the fish. I liked how the thick, steel cable coiled into the sea. I imagined my protagonists voyaging aimlessly in a boat suspended in the air.

There were a lot of people on set: a crew of about 30, plus seven actors, including Huang Lu, who stars in Li Yang's film *Blind Mountain*.

We shot this sequence at dusk. We figured out how fast and high the cable could go. We asked the actors to jump on the boat, then set the mechanism in motion and filmed and shot stills as the boat moved backwards towards the sea.

Shooting the film in black and white was a way to conjure a sense of distance and alienation, of timelessness. I also like the purity, the simplicity that black and white imparts. I find it dreamlike. While the first two parts of the film had a musical soundtrack, the other parts had only natural sound.

From a Chinese perspective, this image is melancholy and beautiful. It is hopeful. It represents yearning and uncertainty. The seven characters aren't intended to depict any particular group – rather, they represent young people as a whole, Chinese or foreign alike. All young people have hopes and dreams as well as doubts.

We live in a fast-changing world. People are able to travel to different places. This work poses the question of whether we have a spiritual dimension to our lives. Imagining the future, enjoying the experience of visiting a museum – these are spiritual things. For me it's not the identity of these seven young people that matters, it's their spirit.

Yang Fudong's CV



Yang Fudong

Born: Beijing, 1971.

Trained: Studied oil painting at the China Academy of Art, Hangzhou.

Influences: Qing dynasty painter Xu Tao, Yuan dynasty painter Ni Zan, Ming dynasty painter Xu Wei, Botticelli, Francis Bacon, Fellini, Antonioni.

Low and high points: “Sometimes when you finish a piece of work you have been working effortlessly on there is a sense of loss. So it is important for an artist to think independently, and be persistent in creating art.”

Top tip: “Have faith in the beautiful things in the world.”

Yang Fudong's solo show, *Dawn Breaking*, is at Long Museum West Bund, Shanghai, until 3 June.

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