

## **Xu Bing: Landscape Landscipt**

**Ashmolean Museum Oxford 28 February to 19 May**

The spirit of protest and rebelliousness that I associate with Xu Bing's inversions of language conventions is not at first apparent in this show. In one of his earlier works, for example, two encrypted, copulating pigs referred to his experience of re-education in a rural area during Mao's Cultural Revolution and amusingly conjured images of *Animal Farm*, but alas this work does not grace the galleries at the Ashmolean. But, gradually, one sees that language is central to this show.

A traditional Chinese scholar/bureaucrat trained in the art and connoisseurship of calligraphy, Xu writes and paints his culture, racked by the knowledge of its modern history. The show opens subtly with sketchbooks and drawings that tell the story of the life and art education of the artist. The viewer follows Xu's works almost as though Xu were a pilgrim traversing the Chinese landscapes and, despite the understated quality of these little sketches, a sense of the cultural distance travelled becomes clear.

*Friendship Hotel, Beijing, 1970*, is a small sketch with spikey calligraphic silver birch trees; the hotel in the distance was one of the few connections to the outside world in 1970. Here officials from the Chinese government met with international visitors around the time of the era of so-called Ping-pong diplomacy with the US. The view quietly encapsulates what Xu has described as his ‘thirst’ for culture. The context and backdrop of the violent use of language and calligraphy during the Cultural Revolution, 1966-76, intensifies the quietude of this little drawing. Likewise, *Farm Buildings, Shouliang Gou Village, 1974*, depicts the village where Xu was re-educated from 1974 to 1977. The imagery from these drawings and prints – patterned terraced fields, enclosures, a suckling pig, thatched barns and evidence of human activities and labour – is drawn out in later work.

*Family Plots, 1988*, is one work from a repeating series of woodblock prints, influenced by Andy Warhol’s serial works which consider the implications of mechanical reproduction. The title refers to a 1950s policy of allowing families to have their own vegetable gardens within a commune. The patterns of plants and fields composed of calligraphic units are similar to blocks of type forms arranged by a compositor. This work has again been serialised into an 11-print scroll, ‘Series of Repetitions: Ziliudi’,

1987, where the block is gradually carved away. The series starts with a completely black image and progresses along to a totally white image, as though the fields were moving from night to the clear light of day.

In a talk following the opening of the show I was able to ask Xu why the recent work is less obviously protest art. He replied that in Chinese culture to protest is to go to the mountains. He also reminded me that he had made a poster in support of protests in Tiananmen Square. In the second room, which is the crux of the exhibition, the 'Landscape' method of calligraphy is developed from exactly that: going to the mountains in the Himalayas and drawing them directly with the Chinese character for mountain. This investigation moves away from aesthetic concerns towards a questioning of the function of language. In Chinese culture pictographic writing is intrinsic to the landscape depicted, thus to write the landscape is also to paint it.

There are intuited parallels with Jacques Derrida's deconstruction method, particularly with Xu's seminal work, *Book from the Sky*, 1988, where 4,000 Chinese characters made as woodblock prints in the traditional canonical mode form an intensity of apparent signs that actually signify nonsense, analogous to a visual *Finnegan's Wake*; his Square Word

Calligraphy, a hybrid of English and Chinese characters, and Landscript all challenge the authority of conventional languages, producing questioning or deferment of meaning. As with all western influences he analyses and responds through his own cultural history.

It is Xu's ambition to produce Landscript that is visual, not phonetic, that can be read by anyone including those who are disenfranchised in the current neoliberal global situation. This is an ancient dream of a universal language. It is likely that Xu's extensive teaching has spurred this idea and the seeds of it can be seen in the last room of the exhibition where his work with groups of children in Kenya has produced ecologically aware murals. Animated trees of words and patterns make a forest with swinging monkeys and snakes. The current universal language of global capitalism is English. The possibility of a global village pictographic language is imaginative, but suggests the further levelling of culture. To answer my own question to Xu, the spirit of protest has become a gentle manifesto for our survival.

**Stephen Lee** is a sculptor.