

MAGICIAN SPACE

魔金石空间

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天上去 | 胡昀作品展

Up To The Sky | An Exhibition of Hu Yun 2010.5.30-7.25

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## Hu Yun: Up to the Sky

Curator: Karen Smith  
2010.05.30 - 07.25

In the dry dusty landscape of Beijing in June, in the heart of this 'urban jungle' in the depths of the famed factory compound that is today home to 798 Art District, a field of green grass—yes, green and not the customary scorched, torched, ochre straw that lines the city's highways—exerts an instant draw on the gaze. There is so much simple beauty, and simple pleasure, in viewing a small patch of green against neutered hues of concrete, tarmac, grey brick and stone, that when noticed it has a mesmerising effect.

In fact, the city highways of both Beijing and Shanghai—the artist Hu Yun's hometown—are no longer the simple by-product of a manmade road; today these edges are carefully nurtured and tended, and increasingly blessed with lashings of chlorophyll. The switch is recent, but like so many aspects of life in China today, a China that is constantly changing, this transformation has been almost as quickly accepted as a fact of life as it has subsequently been taken for granted. It is aspects of the contemporary landscape like these, as well as of contemporary life, that appeal to Hu Yun on an emotive level, and which inspire his works, and which are the particular focus of the exhibition *Up to the Sky*. Where in the several years since his graduation in 2008 those works have largely consisted of drawings, in the context of this, Hu Yun's first solo exhibition the works are a series of four individual pieces but which are integrally linked by the core idea expressed in the phrase *Up to the Sky*, which is taken as the exhibition's title, as well as the title of the work which represents the climax of the show. This core idea can be broadly defined as a mapping of elemental forces from the physical world in terms of conceptual forms and responses via references to observed details and nuances from the physical world. In particular, the emphasis is placed upon details that in being so common that they fail to command attention are, as a result, taken for granted. That is, as can be concluded from the facts of recent natural disasters, until those forces acquire such gravitas that lives are lost in the destruction that is unleashed. Hurricanes, earthquakes, typhoons, and the impact of global warming repeatedly remind us of forces beyond our control, as well as those that are produced and exacerbated by our actions. Conversely, in near dormant states, they exude the innocence of a sleeping child, and retreat into near invisibility.

Hu Yun invokes ( ) these natural elements in exactly their subtlest, most innocuous state. In the art works that result, he offers a naïve, unassuming idyll that panders to our ego, to our ingrained superiority over these forces of nature, and which lulls us, playfully, into a genuine sense of security that is never quite proved false. At least, not in an illustrative manner, but that is, the artist hopes, suggested in the reflections we surely take away for viewing the work.

The process of exploring the exhibition via the deliberate sequence in which the works are placed parallels a sense of motion through the world, through its elements and, one imagines from the title, through a process of evolution: towards an enlightenment of sorts. Following the logic of the title, if we embrace the idea of being raised up to the sky, then we hope to be uplifted at the very least in the process of experiencing Hu Yun's work. The phrase 'up to the sky' has an almost religious connotation, and whilst the experience of passing through the exhibition is intended to induce—amongst other things—a received understanding of spirituality, the process has also been conceived ultimately to return the visitors to earth, albeit with a renewed sense of the self-interested nature of our aspirations and expectations as stirred by the promise with which the title of the exhibition beckons us into its realm.

To contextualise this process as the artist conceived it, we must return to the patch of grass that is placed at the start of the exhibition, of the sequence of works and, in this instance, at the entrance to the exhibition space itself. On encountering this square of verdant vitality, our first thought is cognitive: this grass is lush, plush, but not as a lawn. There is a wildness to its texture that advertises its false nature. It is clearly not native to the immediate environs. This is clearly turf, newly cut and firm in its square edges, that has been imported into the locale for the purpose of art. This is indicated by the juxtaposition of a second patch of grass, this one grafted onto the surface of a standard metal flat-bed trolley. As clumps of hair are woven into a wig frame so here clumps of grass are inserted at even intervals into a wooden board laid flat on the trolley to create a field akin to miniature sports pitch, although it is devoid of markings that might indicate which sporting purpose it serves. That same wildness in its texture, together with its diminutive scale, neutralises any such possibility. The trolley initially appears to caution too swift a dismissal as it has an additional hand rail welded on opposite the original one, allowing it to be pushed or pulled from either side and thus suggesting a new function as if a toy. The allusion, although pragmatic in being mechanical rather than an obvious plaything, is not misplaced. The title of this piece is *Have Fun* but we find ourselves wondering how. Natural inhibition in the presence of 'art' constrains us from giving the trolley a push, a shove, but this activity is what the artist intended, and what *Have Fun* invites. This portion of the show, the little oasis of green, has been calculated as an opening gambit, to lull the visitor into an aura of pleasure, of enjoyment and of lightness at the work, the artist's touch and the nature of his concerns as they unfold in the three pieces that follow.

The artist describes these concerns as being firmly centred on daily things, on elements of nature in daily life that are often intangible other than the way they connect with the senses. Here, he lists the air around us, wind, rain, light, the sun, ergo warmth and cold. These things are so very present in our daily experience, but where they usually lack visible or fixed form they customarily have but an ethereal presence in art. It is Hu Yun's interest in weaving these elements in to his art that directed and informed the works produced for *Up to the Sky*. For the artist the combination of works and the elements they contain mediates the experience of the exhibition as a whole, providing a series of situations that function as prompts to the senses, and which have been orchestrated to address different parts of the heart and mind as they elicit various responses. Thus, the light-hearted invitation to 'have fun' with the trolley is one calibrated against the anticipated responses that are to follow. The phrase represents the first of the several contrasts, or challenges, that have been built into the show.

Moving inside to the first space / work, the viewer finds a second oasis of green, this time flourishing from the top of what is intended to represent the top section of a chimney stack in a piece that is simply *Untitled*. The whiteness of the space and of the external face of the chimney almost allows the illusion of weightlessness to prevail (and the viewer floating in space to view the chimney top)...but not quite. This section of chimney has a mysterious series of vertical windows set in it, of sequentially shortened proportions, which contradict our reading of a chimney. The glass is frosted; only a whisper of light from beyond hints at the space within. We can only imagine this to be a fairytale turret, a castle tower, rather than something as ( ) mundane as a simple chimney. The greenery that sprouts from the chimney top colludes with our inclination



towards fantasy. But here again, it takes but a momentary reflection to realise that the plume of green has merely replaced the spume of white smoke that habitually rises from these depths. Here, Hu Yun contrasts the beauty of which that smoke is capable—in his experience, in the depths of winter when the smoke is both thick and white and billows against a habitually colourless, grey sky—and the manner in which in its motion it links the earth to the atmosphere. Again, the point one might draw here is how the impact of Man's earthly activities taints the heavenly spheres. We too often incline towards reading beauty into the bleak situations we create thus deflecting the uncomfortable burden of responsibility.

In the process of circling this mysterious tower, we have already become aware of the next work. This is a video piece located in a space adjacent to the tower, and notable for the irregular clanking that is its singular soundtrack. From being touched by the earth (in confronting *Have Fun*), contemplating the atmosphere (in the *Untitled* tower), we are now in the realm of the wind as indicated by the title *A Blast of Wind*. The tiny monitor used to show the work is suspended in mid-air, its screen separated from the frame that was designed to contain it. This allows the screen to be hung such that the recorded sequence is shown upside down. The video reveals and unswerving focus on three flag poles. Their flags are stowed out of sight and the only visible motion is that of the wind rattling the steel cables that run their length. Beyond that, the only action to unfold in the ten-minute sequence is the arrival of the dawn and the dissolution of darkness into daylight.

This passage from dark to light, from night to day, represents a metaphysical setting of the stage for the next and final work in the show. Lulled by the erratic rhythm of the wind / cables against the flagpoles, and the power of the sun as it makes its presence felt, the viewer now moves from the darkness of this space to the arena of the final piece, from which the exhibition takes its title. The contrast here is dramatic. The room, a far larger space than used to host the previous three works, is a blinding cloud of light. The entire ceiling is lined with fluorescent lights that radiate light in Biblical proportions. The edges, corners and dimensions of the space are erased (for some moments until the eyes adjust to the light and then it is hard to navigate the field of light created by the refraction of light bouncing off the four white walls, ceiling and the floor). The drama here derives from the violent nature of this brightness; all seeing, leaving nothing hidden or obscured by shadow. Anyone who has spent a summer in Northern Europe will recall the effect of the white nights, when the sun never sets, leading to an 'elevated' emotional state that can be exuberant, ecstatic or even manic. Generally, the emotions associated with light are in direct inverse proportions to the depression associated with lightless winter months when the sun never rises above the horizon, and yet to remain in this space too long under the glare of the neon strips inevitably conjures images of sleep deprivation, used as an effective method of human torture and of the insanity that lurks in the realm of insomnia.

For Hu Yun the associations are more immediately connected to the human / spiritual world, and tied to the expectations prompted by the work's title. Within this unrelieved flood of whiteness, the black lines of a filigree steel staircase on the main wall in the space take on a graphic flatness. It takes a moment to realise that the staircase is spiral in form, and that it emerges from the wall some distance from the ground, and disappears back into the wall just beneath the ceiling. Here, Hu Yun brings us close to the 'sky' but then denies us the possibility of the final ascent. To remain here too long becomes torture indeed.

In articulating the impulse that led to this abrupt act of denial, Hu Yun describes the viewers' passage through the show as being similar to passing through the levels of a video game: the first level is like a warm up—the element of fun and relaxation to draw 'players' into a second round. At the stakes are raised, so the pulse begins to race. In being intrigued at what happens next, the player's determination to reach the end increases. It is as a process of initiation — a pilgrimage to some perhaps? — which demands a commitment from the viewer / player which is as much mental as it is physical and emotional. Hu Yun has determined that viewing art requires an act of seeing and experiencing that should not always be passive, at least not in all senses, which is why he leaves the audience in the lurch as it were, promising the sky and denying them all but a taste of its implied purity and infinite nature. Viewers are intended to feel disappointment as they turn, rejected from the 'sky' at the end of the exhibition. And this is perhaps one indication of Hu Yun's skill as an artist: to take such simple concepts and elements as he weaves into each of these four pieces, to have turned them into such simple forms, and yet to have inverted that simplicity into a rich experience that leaves visitors wanting more. For as Hu Yun seems to have understood, if it were that simple to receive all that the world promises through the simple steps he devised then in his own terms, both as a human being and as an artist, where would he to go next?

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Installation View



*Up to the Sky*

2010

Installation

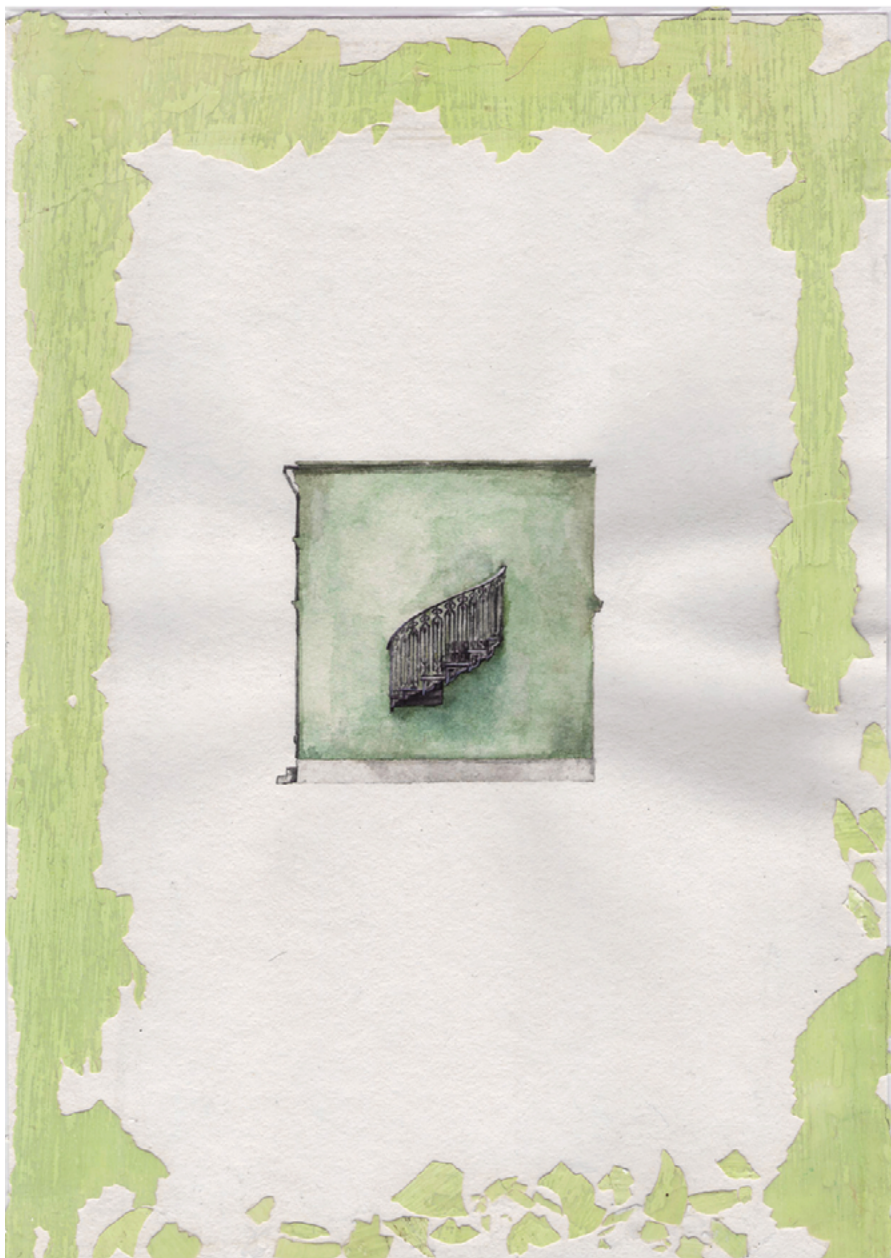
Fluorescent tube, metallic circular stairs

Dimensions variable









*Keep Silence*  
2010  
Painting  
Pencil & watercolor on paper, wall paint  
21 x 29cm





*Untitled*

2010

Installation

bricks, wood, frosted glass, tree, soil

250 x 300 x 400 cm





*Untitled (detail)*





*Untitled*  
2010  
Painting  
Pencil & watercolor on paper  
21 x 29cm



*A Blast of Wind*  
2010  
Video installation  
LCD screen, steel rope, speakers  
15 x 25 x 80cm





*Have Fun*  
2010  
Painting  
Pencil & watercolor on cardboard  
24 x 24cm



*Have Fun*

2010

Installation

handcart, a piece of turf, football

90 x 120 x 100 cm





About the Artist

Hu Yun

1986 Born in Shanghai, China  
Graduated from Total Art Studio, China Academy of Art  
Currently lives and works in Shanghai.

Solo Exhibition

2010 Up to the Sky, Magician Space, Beijing, CN

Group Exhibitions

- 2010 Monologue: Works on Paper FQ Project, Shanghai, CN  
OV Gallery Group Show, OV Gallery, Shanghai, CN
- 2009 The Hand That Draws by Itself, 18 Gallery & Galerie Magda Danysz, Shanghai, CN  
KÅT A4 (HORNY A4): Group Exhibition at Box, Galleri BOX, Gothenburg, SE  
Vanishing, ddm warehouse, Shanghai, CN  
In the Making: The mARkeT - Summer 2009, Beijing Center for the Arts, Beijing, CN  
Art Economics Beyond Pattern Recognition, Osage Gallery, Shanghai, CN
- 2008 Show Time, ddm warehouse, Shanghai, CN  
Take Your Time: Contemporary Art Exhibition, Star Space, Shanghai, CN  
Pink is the New Red, Triangle Gallery, London, UK
- 2007 The 3rd Lianzhou International Photo Festival, Lianzhou, Guangdong, CN  
Why Go To Tibet: Survey of Tibetan Subject Matter in Painting, Long March Space, Beijing, CN
- 2006 New Folk Movement: The Reconstruct of the Commonality Living, Songzhuang, Beijing, CN  
DNA Project 2006 Anyang, Anyang, KR  
The 6th Pingyao Photography Festival Digital Video Art Exhibition, Pingyao, Shanxi, CN

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