

Gu Xiong: Migrations

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She reminded me to think in dreams.

Somewhere there is a sketchbook, a collection of drawings of landscapes and lakes, maybe icebergs, ragged pine trees, undulations of granite, expanses of wilderness. Snow, maybe a sleigh, possibly a church in a rural village, the images are small but detailed, exquisitely executed in pencil and ink on off-white paper. I imagine that the cover of the book is brown, thick unbleached craft paper that has been rolled back as the author holds it in his lap, arranges the pages to rework the images as he moves through the exhibition. It will be passed around so others can see what he has seen in Beijing, beyond the limited confines of the small village in the mountains, cut off from the outside world. The hand that rendered the images, and the hands that receive the book, look weathered, they are tough from manual work.

I see this whole scenario played out in a series of large drawings, but this time on canvas, in charcoal, monumental depictions of an exchange, the retelling of a story through fragments and details. The man holds the book and a group of youth gather around him, he is gesturing at a page, a clear image of a mountain that I instantly recognize as a copy of a Lawren S. Harris painting. I am there in the middle of the group, with Gu Xiong, we are teenagers, arms around each other’s shoulders, and we point at the image on the page as the landscape of central China rolls out behind us (as if rendered by Franklin Carmichael). Everyone is smiling; we are all seeing the world differently in this moment, the terrain has shifted, our foundations shaken. These drawings do not exist.

If I recall correctly, it was at the height of the Cultural Revolution. There was a man from their village who had been lucky enough to go to Beijing, and while he was there he saw a stunning exhibition of paintings of landscapes that exuded a remarkably bold confidence. The paintings seemed so modern, so unconstrained. He filled his sketchbook with precise drawings of these paintings and then returned to share them with his village, to describe their scale and vivid colours. “They were so political” Gu Xiong told me, “but the government did not understand this.” Gu Xiong pauses to look out the window of the bus as it climbs a mountain seemingly bereft of nature, packed with buildings that crowd the narrow road. “They thought of the Group of Seven as simply landscape painters, they didn’t understand that we would see them as revolutionary, as freedom.”

I want to believe that that lost sketchbook is still out there, somewhere, perhaps forgotten, or hopefully cherished and studied. I imagine it with a collection of notebooks, eight or nine inches square, that Gu Xiong completed while he was a teenager living in that tiny village in the mountains. Saved by his parents, they were passed back to him when they first visited him in Vancouver. In red ink, above a drawing of a contemplative self-portrait, a figure alone in semi-darkness that stands out from the heroic iconography of the Cultural Revolution that fill many of the pages, Gu Xiong has been scolded for being “Too Bourgeois!” Gu Xiong and I will eventually spread them all out in cases in a gallery, a foundation for a collaboration exploring our contrasting memories of China and Canada. There will be a wall of Group of Seven paintings that Gu Xiong surrounds with hundreds of iconic images of heroic workers and soldiers, a sea of postcards engulfing paintings positioned as a Canadian counterpart to Mao’s nationalistic propaganda. In the centre of the wall, anchoring the arrangement, there is an oil on canvas of the Canadian Shield by Carmichael, a receding expanse of undulating trees and exposed granite, a scene echoed in the next gallery by a monumental charcoal on canvas of a girl in the mountains.

Gu Yu always looked too old to me in that drawing. She was so young at the time, maybe 10 or 12, but in the drawing she looks to be in her mid-twenties, like she does now, sitting across from me in a Los Angeles restaurant. I can’t recall if I have actually seen her since China (1998?), maybe once or twice since then for dinner in Vancouver, but if so, never for long. “What’s wrong with you,” she asked me as the bus slowly churned its way up the side of one of Chongqing’s many steep hills and I continued to sweat profusely. The heat and humidity were intense. (Maybe it was 1998?) I remember a river, late at night, a tidal surge pushing inland, a single wave that disrupted the flow and pushed aside all

the boats on the river, overturning small craft. Apparently, it was a rare event. Someone called it the “dragon.” Life in China felt precarious. Days later, we parted ways and as I returned to Kamloops via Beijing and Vancouver, they would head off to try and visit that village in the mountains. On a late night river crossing, their little boat would be rammed and pushed under, it would spin over, sinking fast and swallowing water, gulping in volumes as if the boat itself was gasping for air. She was trapped and barely escaped. I remember the phone call when they got back to Canada, the photographs of her in the hospital, Gu Xiong trying to reconstruct her experience of near drowning in a pool in Vancouver. He saw her story of drowning as an allegory for the new China. The drawings are huge, haunting, in one her head nearly takes up the entire image, though part of her face is obscured by the swirl of water, her mouth open, gulping. Now, she sits across from me in Little Tokyo and I want to ask her what she remembers about that night but who would want to relive that nightmare. I tell her it all feels like fragments to me now, how so much has changed since that trip, all the moves and migrations, constant change and displacement.

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The bus passes by the open mouths of tunnels that snake deep into the rock, where people now live and work, laying down to sleep next to their machines behind iron gates. The tunnels are another narrative written in to the landscape, an intense burrowing that wormed its way deep down caused by a genuine obsessive fear of the West. In the darkness carved out as a place to hide from an attack that never came, the man and the machine dream together, their imaginings fueled by the scent of burnt metal, cutting fluid and oil, mixed with broth and sweat, all tinged with damp rock and earth. A powerful odour pushes up from deep within, an intense rank smell of surging animal and metal. You hear the whistle first and then the dark horse emerges into the open air, turns and races down the mountain. “What is wrong with you?” she asks me again as the bus shudders over potholes. At the end of the bus ride, there will be a hand-painted sign on pink tissue paper that says something like Andrew Hunter on Canadian Art. I will speak in short statements so that Gu Xiong can translate for the students at the Sichuan Art Institute, but when he talks he seems to go on forever, there is a lot of laughing. I have no idea what he told them. Everything changed after that, home looked very different from that moment on.

“That exhibition also had a profound impact on Chinese artists,” Gu Xiong tells me over breakfast in the warm sun, under palm trees, “everyone had that picture of the horse and train on their wall, we all understood his work, it inspired many of us.” We have spoken of Canadian trains many times, of iron horse locomotives and the precarious passes and tunnels cut through the mountains of British Columbia by Chinese labourers who were discouraged from staying in Canada and taxed to bring their families along, they spread out across the country to settle together in distinct Chinatowns, or to live alone and isolated in small prairie and northern towns, running restaurants and laundries (so often their only legal employment options). The west coast of North America was Gold Mountain, a name from the earlier wave of Chinese migration that came for the gold rush, before the railroad. I can see them all heading into the mountains.

Gu Yu stands high atop a mountain once carved and cut by Chinese railway workers. I imagine rail lines passing below the charcoal image of her, a river winding through a gorge. Once, she came to Kamloops with her father, I remember her on the stage at the university telling her story of growing up in China and then coming to Canada, and I have just watched that narrative further unfold in her recent film A Moth in Spring. Now, we talk about drifting between the real and the imagined, the memories you carry with you and how there is always here, just below the surface. She is describing her latest project with her father exploring the lives of migrant workers, and she wonders aloud about the presence of their past and home in their memories and dreams here, in California, in the Lower Mainland of BC, in Southern Ontario. It feels like the truth is in dreams, in the stories we tell, the allegorical impulse that is so fundamental to her father’s work. A stream of socks and salmon, a Yellow River of Blue Culture, thousands of little pigs, nothing is just what it appears to be, there is always a story to get you to the truth. I tell her, “Alex Colville said that As a good realist, I have to reinvent the world.” He called his works “authentic fictions.” I see this consistently in Gu Xiong’s work and I get why he and so many others were inspired by Colville’s exhibition in Beijing in 1984. (1984, what a year for Colville to be in China.)