

Shi Xinning: Reinventing Reality

Text / Jade Franklin

■ In order to paint in a photorealist style there must first be a photograph from which to amass visual stimulus; this is the very nature of the genre. In the work of Shi Xinning, however, the conventional photorealist working process undergoes something of a conceptual overhaul, for instead of meticulously replicating scenes from contemporary photographs, Shi Xinning works from iconic Western press photographs and gives them a Chinese political twist. Into images that show numerous historically famous people, such as Marilyn Monroe, the British Queen Mother and Peggy Guggenheim, Shi Xinning inserts a convivial Chairman Mao, presented at the height of health and power. These images are usually created in sepia tones or black and white so as to suggest that the artist is being faithful in his reproduction of an original historical photograph. It is readily apparent however, with prior knowledge of the other characters, that the presence of Mao is artistic fabrication. Hypothetically, in terms of time-scale, the Chairman could have met and socialised with such people, but the idea that the communist leader, who was at the time occupied in isolating China from the West, could be happily conversing with royalty in the Queen Mother's carriage or sitting alone with Marilyn Monroe in the back seat of a car is an impossible one. In their implausibility there is no

Shi Xinning, Peep, 2007, Oil on Canvas, 172 x 303 cm, Courtesy Private Collection, London, UK



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Shi Xinning, *Scene*, 2007, Oil on Canvas, 250 cm x 340 cm, Courtesy Private Collection, London, UK (left)
Shi Xinning, *Battle of Diaoyu Island*, 2005, Oil on Canvas, 180x180cm, Courtesy of Shine Art Space (right)

doubt that these historically doctored 'photographs' are intended to be amusing; indeed the artist states that absurdity is the most important element in his works. Concurrently though, the humorous elements within the paintings reveal the poignant socio-political criticism that is inherent in the works of Shi Xinning.

Rewriting History

Through the realist representation of Shi Xinning's painted forms; his precise rendering of skin textures, the reflections of apparent camera flash lights and his intricate use of shadow, the artist is presenting these images to us as pictorial evidence of a new version of history. He even goes so far as to leave a white border around his paintings to suggest a photographic border; a technique influenced by American Photorealist Malcolm Morley. By doing this, in effect creating a reinvented reality, Shi Xinning highlights the ways in which various media present photographs as indisputable fact and demand that we accept them as such. As the photograph is such a direct form of communication, it is particularly persuasive and we are less likely to question its reality and in most cases we accept what we see as the 'truth'. It is in this way that modern popular history is largely understood as through the course of our lives we are frequently exposed to certain photographs with each new viewing of them confirming in our consciousness that these events did occur. By taking a selection of these photographs and altering them, Shi Xinning criticises this unquestioning acceptance and mock-challenges us to accept his new version of reality. Most significantly however, he also elucidates the way that it is possible to re-write history through visual forms and suggests that this is not an uncommon practice.

This was, for example, the sole purpose of Socialist Realism, a genre that Shi Xinning appears

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to allude to in his realist painting style and representations of the Chairman. Under communist regimes this is often the only form of creative expression permitted and all art works are made with the purpose of glorifying the leader, other political figures or the industrial and agricultural works of the people. As a form of propaganda, these paintings, although appearing in a style that is true to life, often bear little relation to reality, in the same way that Shi Xinning's contemporary paintings do not truthfully render past events. The artist therefore highlights the questionable truths of Socialist Realism and the limitations that were imposed on artists in that turbulent historical period.

Alternative Landscapes

In conjunction with his neo-Socialist Realist works, Shi Xinning has produced a body of landscape works that have been copied from documentary photographs. As in the works using historical figures, but presented

in a subtler manner, the landscape works also reveal elements of absurdity and consequently one cannot accept that they are faithful representations of the original photographs.

Shi Xinning's landscapes are stark barren environments where traces of human existence can be seen although no human life appears to exist. In *Island* (2005), the artist depicts a small rocky outcrop surrounded by a flat grey sea, the lack of any comprehensible context bestowing this image with a decidedly eerie quality. Apart from this there initially seems nothing unusual about the island's depiction, but as in all of Shi Xinning's paintings it is on second glance that one begins to notice peculiarities. On this island, crawling along its ridge is a fortress structure that resembles the Great Wall, rising and falling with the elevation of the land. This construction would not appear so out of place were it not for the fact that the island appears to be completely uninhabited and therefore requires no such fortification. That being said, we are only permitted a view of half the island and so remain ignorant as to what could hypothetically lie on the other side of the ridge.

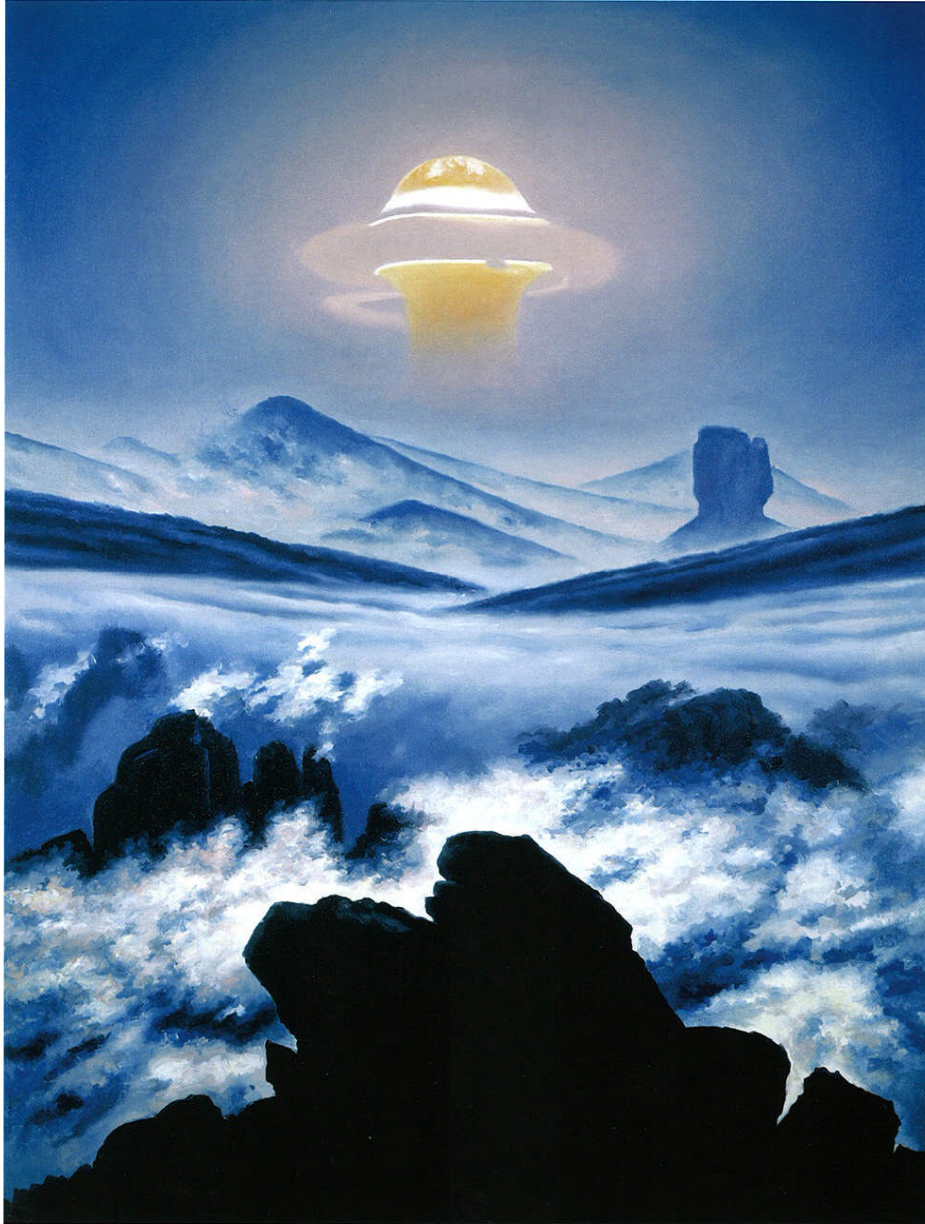
In another work, *White Cliff Coast* (2004), the artist depicts a large container ship that is framed by the surrounding landscape. Painted in black and white, as if copied from an old photograph, one notices that the apparently icy cliff is out of sorts with the trees in the foreground, which appear



Shi Xinning, *Island*, 2005, Oil on Canvas, 102x161cm, Courtesy of Shine Art Space



Shi Xinning, *White Cliff Coast*, 2004, Oil on Canvas, 210x164cm, Courtesy of Shine Art Space



Shi Xinning, A Landscape with H-Bomb, 2006, Oil on canvas, 210 x 164 cm, Courtesy Arndt & Partner Berlin/Zurich