

## The Portrait, or the Long Road to Emptiness Yang Jiechang in Dialogue with Heinz-Norbert Jocks

[>> print](#)

### Ran Dian Ink

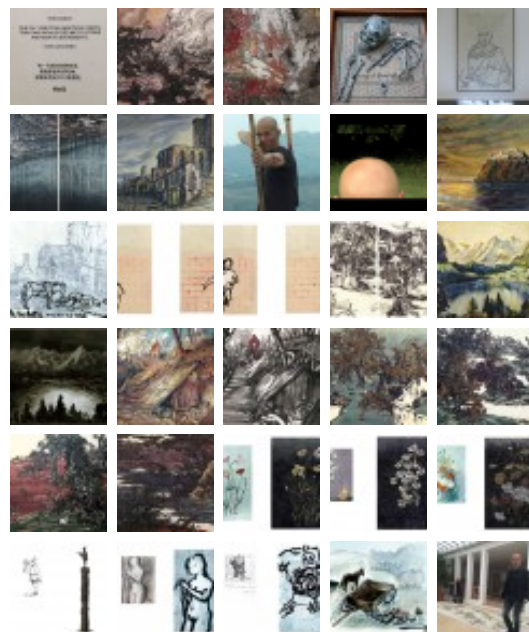
Renowned German journalist, author, curator and art critic, Heinz-Norbert Jocks, met with Yang Jiechang to discuss Yang's his self-portraiture and calligraphy, empathy and the artist, Hitler, copying and becoming human.

**Heinz-Norbert Jocks:** Jiechang, you did many self-portraits. What is the reason for this? And what role does the self-portrait play in your oeuvre? Where does this interest come from?

**Yang Jiechang:** As you know, socialist realism was the dominant style taught in China. This meant drawing after life, and the first model I painted according to this principle was my image in the mirror. As a young student I had the same fascination for self-portraits and drawings of Russian artists as all painting students of my generation. I studied at the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts. The teachers there were not very good, which actually was a big plus, as we were forced to work autonomously from early on.

**HNJ:** In the West the self-portrait is related to the question of personal identity.

**YJC:** For me, the question of identity is equally important. Yet for me it is foremostly calligraphy, which is a kind of liberation, that allows me to raise and express the question of identity. In this respect I am very much influenced by Kang Youwei, who in the late 19th century tried to formulate a new Chinese identity by choosing new calligraphy models, namely stone rubbings from the Qin and Han dynasties.



[See all photos \(31\)](#)



Yang Jiechang and Heinz-Norbert Jocks, Paris 2017 (image Martina Köppel-Yang)

**HNJ:** You do self-portraits in various media. You use new media, too. Why? How did this come about?

**YJC:** Using traditional Chinese media—this means working on *xuan* paper—one meets difficulties in what concerns the presentation of the works in the context of a conventional Western-style exhibition situation. This is one of the reasons why I tried to express my ideas also in other media, for example video, which I mainly use as a means of documentation, as a trace of acts executed by a Chinese literatus or intellectual. The notion of the act is very important for me. When recording such an act executed by me, my image is of course part of the picture; hence here again we have a kind of self-portrait. But let us come back to my beginnings at the art academy. I still remember very well the situation when all the students had to draw a soldier, who was present in class as our model. A nude model was impossible at the time. At the time we were only familiar with socialist realism. We had no clue who, for example, Picasso was. This was complete no-man's-land.

**HNJ:** Can you describe your first self-portrait?

**YJC:** You will be amused, if I tell you! Physically I did not really correspond to the socialist ideal of beauty. I was rather thin and little. Thus I adjusted my self-portrait according to the socialist ideal. This means I rendered my eye brows more fiercely, my body stronger and more muscular—well, healthier than I actually was.

**HNJ:** That is what the surrealist Louis Aragon called the “true lie.” Would you consider the self-portrait a kind of affirmation with the conventional artistic language of the time?

**YJC:** Certainly! I was thin with high cheekbones. Thus I painted myself rather frontally, not from the side. Actually, the official ideal of beauty resembled very much that of the Third Reich. This means strong and healthy people, as we know them from socialist films and model operas. My later self-portraits are more conceptual. I liked Chinese picture stories very much. Like in comics the figures are identified through their names written next to them. Thus it did not matter if the figure actually resembled its model. The self-portraits that were influenced by this kind of picture stories thus had my name written next to my image.

What was important was not the resemblance, but the figure and the action. The figure always wore the same clothes and had the same attributes. Similar to identifying features *à la* Beuys with a hat and vest. This kind of picture-story-like self-portraits were the starting point for the later more symbolical portraits, for example “Self-Portrait at Forty”, which mainly shows the lower part of my body, hence the sex.

**HNJ:** Why is the symbolic important?

**YJC:** My affinity for symbols is related to my interest in traditional Chinese painting, which is full of symbols. There, plants represent specific human virtues, such as integrity or humility. The prunus, for example, blooming in winter, stands for perseverance. The subject, no matter if plant or animal, stands for the character and the inner mood. I did various paintings of trees. One of them shows a burning tree, and another work shows an uprooted tree, nevertheless blooming and drifting through space. For me, these are self-portraits, too. (See images this chapter)



《还是花鸟画1913-2013》，水彩，25.5×14.3 cm，2013（左）；《还是花鸟画1913-2013》，绢本工笔重彩，90×70 cm，2013（右） Yang Jiechang, These are Still Flowers 1913-2013, watercolour, 25.5×14.3 cm, 2013(left); mineral colors on silk, mounted on canvas, 90×70 cm, 2013(right).

**HNJ:** The metaphor of the uprooted tree is certainly linked to the fact that you, after coming to Europe to participate in the exhibition *Les Magiciens de la Terre* curated by Jean-Hubert Martin in 1989, decided to stay in Europe, given all that had happened at Tiananmen Square.

**YJC:** Yes. Uprooted is the one who left his soil. Another time I painted myself burning, which again is a symbol, a symbol for transformation, for transmutation into another state of being. For me, fire is not a symbol of death but something extremely vital pointing to exaltation, transcendence, and transgression. It speaks of something new. Therefore, I also used white as a dominant color for this painting.

**HNJ:** I want to come back to the experience of uprooting. I realize that you can articulate yourself well in English and in German, but it seems that Chinese is where your heart lies. So it's as if you wanted to maintain and recreate the intimate contact with your homeland through the language.

**YJC:** That I prefer Chinese as a means of communication is not only related to this aspect. My written Chinese is at a very high level. As you know, Chinese characters are pictograms, very complex, semantically rather open and ambiguous, less unequivocal than German or English words. Take for example the word for “human being”. The Chinese character resembles the Eiffel Tower a bit. In Chinese culture the human being is understood as a link between heaven and earth, as a kind of receiver of information from the heavenly sphere, an antenna. For me, as an artist, images are important. I am able to read ancient script styles, such as the oracle bone script (*jiaquwen* 甲骨文), or the bronze script (*jinwen* 金文), and I love Chinese poetry. I cannot give up this old culture that only few contemporary artists know and understand well. The Cultural Revolution tried to cut off the



connection to tradition. But Chinese tradition is incredibly rich. It constitutes a positive influence in my life that allows me a profound understanding of our world and of life itself. Therefore I am interested in preserving and developing this tradition. This is part of my work as an artist. For me, the Chinese characters also represent a philosophical position, as beyond their semantic content they also have some kind of energetic potential. What I mean is, for example, the word for having a “rest” is *xiuxi* (休息). The first part of the word *xiu* is constituted by the radicals for “human being” and “tree”. The second part *xi* consists of the radicals for “self” and “heart”. If we look at the word again now, we can read the following: “to rest” means being centered and rooted in oneself like a tree and thus finding one’s heart or center. I follow this example and during my holidays I do nothing and rest. As you see, if I gave up Chinese, I would lose my worldview. It would be too radical, and I actually would give up my identity. Further, the fact that I am not very good in foreign languages made me focus on images, which provided me with a great capacity of deciphering images. My foible thus turns out to be a strength.



《还是花鸟画1913-2013》，水彩，24.3×29.3 cm，2013（左）；《还是花鸟画1913-2013》，绢本工笔重彩，90×70 cm，2013（右） Yang Jiechang, These are Still Flowers 1913-2013, watercolor, 24.3×29.3 cm, 2013(left); mineral colors on silk, mounted on canvas, 90×70 cm, 2013(right).

**HNJ:** I assume that the vision of your own culture has changed with the distance created through your life in Europe. Did your self-consciousness change or shift, too? And further, does this change or shift manifest itself in the self-portraits you did in Europe? We already mentioned the use of other media, which is rather related to formal aspects than to questions of content.

**YJC:** Yes, my vision changed, the portraits became more and more “abstract”. My self-portraits are different from those of many Western artists, as mine are more than often not realistic. There is a switch from the symbolic to the abstract. One of the self-portraits that is part of the series *Underground Flowers* consists of human bones made from flower-patterned blue and white porcelain. It alludes to the students who died in 1989, and I imagine myself as one of them. The flowers of the pattern are an image within an image and anticipate resurrection, life from death, transformation. Another self-portrait that comes to my mind in this respect is “Testament”. This work consists of a ceramic urn with calligraphy that says, if I die one day from unnatural death, one should feed me to a tiger and keep its excrement. This is as much a self-portrait as “Self-Portrait at Forty” that shows my body with an erect penis, which signifies that we should advance. It is about the motive of vitality. For my self-portrait at fifty, the “Tibetan Pavilion”, I painted my portrait on top of that of the Dalai Lama, who thus has a mustache. The painting goes together with a cordon creating a space reminiscent of a pavilion. I had the idea to show this piece at the Venice Biennale, where among the many national pavilions, a culture as important as the Tibetan nevertheless is not represented. The self-portrait, a two-dimensional canvas, is thus enlarged into a cultural space. My cultural pavilion, in contrast to the other pavilions that deal mainly with material aspects, is about spirituality. To establish such a pavilion would be my ideal. Again, another self-portrait shows memories from my childhood, the experience when I nearly drowned. This image similarly is not only about my personal childhood experience but also about a more actual event, the economic crisis of 2008.



Yang Jiechang 楊詰蒼, Underground Flowers – Self- portrait, 2004, blue-white porcelain, wooden box, silk print (image courtesy the artist)



《还是花鸟画1913-2013》，水彩，32.4×24.4 cm，2013（左）；《还是花鸟画1913-2013》，绢本工笔重彩，90×70 cm，2013（右） Yang Jiechang, These are Still Flowers 1913-2013, watercolor, 32.4×24.4 cm, 2013(left); mineral colors on silk, mounted on canvas, 90×70 cm, 2013(right).

**HNJ:** Does your “Self-Portrait at Forty” render the lower part of the male body a representation of the man as such?

**YJC:** Not really. I am more interested in the idea of a vital force, a kind of fearlessness. I was forty in 1996. It was a difficult period, economically and also existentially. But if you know that you are healthy, then you need not worry. At the time we lived in Aubervilliers, a very difficult Parisian suburb.

**HNJ:** You said that you started to paint self-portraits as it was easier to choose oneself as a subject.

**YJC:** Yes, it is less problematic than portraying other people. Imagine if I painted Mao Zedong or Xi Jinping and the portrait did

not correspond to the official standards but only to mine. This would create huge conflicts. Painting one's own image is easier—no false considerations, no detours.

**HNJ:** What did you learn about yourself through your life in Paris and Germany?

**YJC:** I learned more about my own culture, namely, how important the culture of the Chinese literati actually is for my life and my work. This old culture is very much alive for me, and I believe that it is still extremely vital, with a great potential and future. The encounter with German romanticism made me discover and understand this culture more profoundly. It was the contact with Western culture that in the end transformed me into a Chinese literatus. The fact that I acquired and restored an old watermill near Heidelberg, the area where my wife Martina grew up, actually widened my understanding of the life-style of the literati, who often lived in the countryside. There I try to balance my life, to find harmony and to build an alternative for the future, not only for me but also for my family and my friends. I am inspired by my spiritual master, who leads an alternative life in the countryside near Guangzhou. Like him, I wish to generate, in the tradition of the Chinese literati, a field of positive energy for me and my surroundings. Unfortunately this part of Chinese culture has been nearly completely neglected. My life in Europe allows me to enhance and develop this aspect, which implies that I myself have to progress. My wife and family allow me to accomplish this work by letting me find my center and work on the transformation of my self.



《花少年1924-2014》，纸上炭笔，14×9.5 cm，2014（左）；《花少年1924-2014》，铜雕，1/3版，212×20×20 cm，2014（右） Yang Jiechang, Young Man With Flowers 1924 – 2014, 2014, pencil on paper, 14×9.5 cm, 2014(left); Bronze, 2014, 212×20×20 cm (right.)

**HNJ:** What your master teaches you is to forget and overcome your own self, I guess? How do the techniques that you practice to achieve this—for example, meditation—influence your idea of the self-portrait?

**YJC:** In the process of the dissimulation of the self, everything becomes clearer, more evident. This is not in contradiction with the concept of the self-portrait. On the contrary. The more you forget your *self*, the bigger it becomes. The process of overcoming oneself actually enlarges and strengthens the self. At a certain level nothing can disturb your self any more. The disturbing element actually is integrated into the energy circuit and thus there is no gain nor loss, only a sequence. Everything is energy and a human being can be perceived as a set of energetic pattern.

**HNJ:** How does this manifest itself in your works?



**YJC:** Through meditation I learned to accept the natural development of events. As soon as you stop to put pressure on yourself and to force things, you obtain a kind of serenity visible in your painting style and brush. After I had obtained this kind of serenity, I started to face difficult subjects, for example the copying of Hitler's paintings. I was able to approach such a subject in a rather relaxed and unbiased way. During the process of copying I learned a lot. Instead of looking at the subject through black and white glasses, I could completely concentrate on the aspect of copying itself. I copied the paintings of the young Hitler and discovered the heart of a young man striving to become an artist. I was able to overcome the political dimension.



《伊娃1911-2011》，纸上炭笔，41.7×29.6 cm，2014（左）（Photo: Marc Damage）；《伊娃1911-2011》，墨、丙烯，185×96 cm，2014（右）（Photo: Marc Damage） Yang Jiechang, Eva 1911-2011, 2014, pastel on paper, 41.7×29.6 cm, 2014(left); ink and acrylic on paper, mounted on canvas, 185 x 96 cm (right)(Photo: Marc Damage).

**HNJ:** Has this something to do with empathy? Through the process of copying you actually empathize with the model, with the other, and reveal that everything, everybody, has two sides, bad and good. Thus, Hitler cannot merely be reduced to the figure of the criminal he actually was. I imagine that you are interested in some kind of balance of both sides to avoid that the negative dominates. I would like to know more about the aspect of empathy in regards to painting.

**YJC:** It is actually not so much related to empathy. As you know, I was a teacher at the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts. When copying paintings by Hitler, I see myself, the teacher, copying paintings by a serious young man who wanted to become an artist but was refused by the art academy. This is the starting point for my interest in the paintings by Hitler. I certainly could have chosen paintings by other politicians as a model, for example paintings by Churchill or Bush. Yet their paintings seem more pretentious and false. Hitler as a subject seemed more challenging. The paintings I chose as models are very early works that he painted when he applied for the art academy. I am not interested in their painterly quality but in the motivation behind the paintings, which I would qualify as the sincere wish to study painting. This motivation is very different from that of the above-mentioned politicians, for whom painting was a pastime. I don't want to speak just about the atrocities Hitler committed. His politics of expansion and the persecution and extinction of Jews was an unforgivable crime against humanity. Approaching the figure of a Hitler not yet in power by trying to understand who he was before he became a politician, transposes the question of good and bad onto another level of understanding that vanishes if we approach this figure only under the aspect of the power-obsessed, fascistic demon. Another dimension is revealed. Remember the aspect of frequency and energy pattern. I look at Hitler not only under the aspects of politics and history but also under the aspect of energy pattern. If we looked at a painting by George Bush under this aspect, we would actually realize that we see a painting done by a demon. Yet, looking at Hitler's early paintings, we realize that they were done by a stubborn, taciturn youth. I dare say that if he had found a good teacher at the time, he might not have turned into the demon as the bloody history remembers him. For me, the power of art is the overcoming

of the demonic. That is what art and meditation have in common. For both you need a good teacher to lead the pupil onto the right path to find himself.



《麦元帅1924-2014》，纸上炭笔，20.5×15.3 cm，2014（左）（Photo: Marc Damage）；《麦元帅1924-2014》，墨、丙烯，185×96 cm，2014（右）（Photo: Marc Damage） Yang Jiechang, Generalfeldmarschall Mackensen 1924 – 2014, 2014, pencil on paper, 20.5×15.3 cm (left); ink and acrylic on paper, mounted on canvas, 185 x 96 cm. (Photo: Marc Damage)

**HNJ:** Let us come back again to the process of copying. It is a way of empathy, nevertheless.

**YJC:** Partially. He painted these works about a hundred years ago. And in some way I help him to realize now what he could not do at the time. I am painting in his stead. And through the process of copying, with the help of my hand, his paintings are changed. I am touching this person, who is considered a monster, with my energy to understand what kind of human being he was. What happened to him when he was painting? What did this painter who transformed into a politician think? Through copying his paintings I actually vanquished the monster and learned that it is too easy to merely consider him as the incarnation of evil. Through the process of copying I came very close to this figure and I learned that it is too simple to merely categorize him as a monster. It is already a cliché that hinders any recognition of the fact that even this evil engendered something positive that would not exist without this madness. Even though this sounds paradoxical, we have to consider that the monster actually made humankind more aware of these kind of atrocities, and thus helped to avoid them. Maybe the monster would really become an artist in a second life, and by copying his paintings I finally let him do so. What I am interested in, too, is the transformation of a taboo. Art has the capacity to assimilate. Therefore, it is possible to touch on something as problematic [as this] through the means of art. Art can reveal the monster and deal with it. Anyway, the biggest monster is the self, and the daily war is the one that we have to fight with ourselves.





《战后1915-2015》，水彩，11.8×15.9 cm，2015, Yang Jiechang, After the Battle 1915 – 2015, 2015, watercolour, 11.8×15.9 cm. Yang Jiechang, After the Battle 1915 – 2015, 2015, ink and acrylic on paper, mounted on canvas, 120×232 cm.



《战后1915-2015》，墨、丙烯、宣纸，120×232 cm，2015. Yang Jiechang, After the Battle 1915 – 2015, 2015, ink and acrylic on paper, mounted on canvas, 120×232 cm. Yang Jiechang, Running Children 1, 2014, ink on paper, mounted on canvas, 61.5×68.5 cm( left); Running Children 2, 2014, ink on paper, mounted on canvas, 61.5×68.5 (right)

**HNJ:** This reminds me of the story of your grandfather, a landlord, whose luck was that he lost his fortune through smoking opium and gambling, and thus had his life spared by the communists.

**YJC:** Yes, it is the same. For my grandfather, too, something similar happened: a negative element was transformed into something positive. But there is more that interests me. When Hitler came back from the First World War, he actually did anti-war paintings. In one of my paintings after Hitler's drawings entitled "Triumphbogen" ("Triumphal Arch"; 2014), a scene of buildings destroyed during a battle is the backdrop, on top of which I paint a broken triumphal arch. The triumphal arch is a positive symbol of victory. But in this painting it is a symbol of catastrophe. The painting shows that in 1914, the date of the original, its author was disgusted with war. Again we face the game of positive and negative. By insisting on this aspect, I do not want to play down the atrocities caused by the author of the original painting. On the contrary. Hitler did these drawings on the spot. I am interested in the choice of subject he made. Personally, I received an education in which heroism is emphasized, and I believe that I had painted a positive heroic triumphal arch. I guess that Hitler's personality must have radically changed after the First World War.



Arc de Triomphe 1914-2014, 2014, water coulor on paper, 20 x 30cm.



Yang Jiechang 楊詰蒼, Arc de Triomphe 1914-2014, 2014, ink and acrylic on paper, mounted on canvas, 152 x 191cm (image courtesy the artist)

**HNJ:** Is copying a kind of communication?

**YJC:** Yes. The establishment of a contact, here with something negative, without an immediate rejection and critique. It is



communication on the visual level of the painting, and not communication from a historiographical position. As I mentioned, I think that his choice of subject is very illuminating. Maybe he himself wasn't aware of it. The choice is authentic and has nothing to do with propaganda.



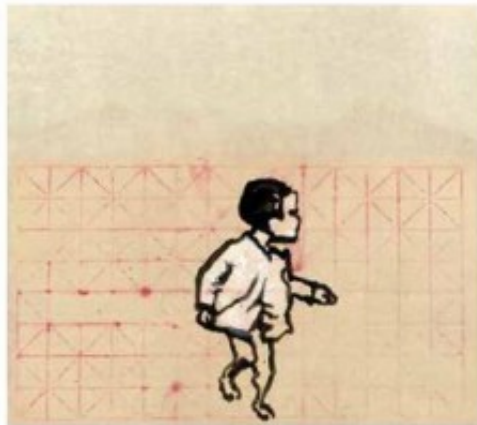
《跑吧1》，水墨，习字纸，61.5×68.5 cm，2014（左）；《跑吧2》，2014年，水墨，习字纸，61.5×68.5 cm，2014（右） Yang Jiechang, Running Children 1, 2014, ink on paper, mounted on canvas, 61.5×68.5 cm( left); Running Children 2, 2014, ink on paper, mounted on canvas, 61.5×68.5 (right)

**HNJ:** You not only copied paintings by Hitler but also paintings by the Song dynasty emperor Huizong.

**YJC:** Yes. Huizong, too, is considered a monster. And this, even though he created an imperial painting academy that set the aesthetic standards still valid today. Yet, it is said that he neglected military affairs and that his policy provoked China's conquest by the Mongols [ultimately].

**HNJ:** What did you learn about yourself through the meditative absorption of Hitler's images?

**YJC:** I learned to be grateful, to give back the positive I receive to society. I learned that life should not be about searching for an antipode or opponent. What is important is an at least three-dimensional perception of the world.



《跑吧3》，2014年，水墨，习字纸，61.5×68.5 cm，2014（左）；《跑吧4》，2014年，水墨，习字纸，61.5×68.5 cm，2014（右） Yang Jiechang, Running Children 1, 2014, ink on paper, mounted on canvas, 61.5×68.5 cm( left); Running Children 2, 2014, ink on paper, mounted on canvas, 61.5×68.5 (right)

**HNJ:** Apropos perception of the world, in your paintings this means not only the representation of trees hinting at the inner composed-ness mentioned above but also landscapes. Recently you painted landscapes with copulating animals. There, different species are having fun with each other. These paintings remind us of scenes from some kind of paradise, where animals do not devour each other but love each other and live together peacefully. How are these paintings related to your self-portraits?

**YJC:** They correspond to the "Self-Portrait at Forty". I started to work on this series after the stock market crash in 2008. If in such a situation it is possible to treat each other peacefully and with love instead of devouring or fighting each other, then



destruction is replaced by the healing power of vitality. In a globalized world, where destructive factors progressively gain importance, an art that proposes the positive is important. The title of this series is “Tale of the 11th Day”, which alludes to Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. He recounts the story of ten young people fleeing from the plague and telling each other stories about love. I am the eleventh who was able to escape catastrophe.

**HNJ:** As if you wanted to show an alternative. In “Je ne veux pas travailler/I do not want to work” (2010) even humans and animals make love.

**YJC:** Yes. For me animals are the kinder and more gracious beings. I always choose essential subjects for my works but I am usually inspired by very banal things and daily events. Look at the big painting over there. There are images of warplanes and bombs, on top of which I painted a kind of spiral or whip resembling a pipe cleaning spiral. The connection of these images came about because I painted the work in another studio, where the pipes are always blocked. When I tried to clean the pipes with such a spiral, the spiral hit my leg. It hurt badly. These tools are extremely elastic, with a lot of tension. I wanted to express this kind of elasticity and tension through painting and calligraphy. For me the spiral here corresponds to the whip of the monk that according to Chinese tradition chases evil away and can stop negative developments. The painting consists of two layers: the lower layer with the image of a battle situation and on top the whip with a calligraphy saying “Do not move!”.



《国王湖1913-2013》，布上油画，35.5×40.5 cm，2013 Yang Jiechang, Lake in the Mountains – Königssee 1913 – 2014 (These are Still Landscapes series), 2014, oil on canvas, 35,5 x 40,5 cm.



《湖光1913-2013》，蛋壳漆画，125×180 cm，2013 Yang Jiechang, Light under Water (These are

Still Landscapes series), 2014, lacquer and eggshell on board, 125 x 180 cm.

**HNJ:** You reduced the colors to black and white to highlight the aspect of the calligraphic tradition.

**YJC:** Yes. I [have] used the brush for fifty-seven years. But as you see, my artistic language and inspiration does not only come from Chinese tradition but, like here in this painting entitled “Wie im Himmel so of Erden/ Like in Heaven so on Earth” (2014), also from ordinary objects, such as the metal spiral. In an earlier painting with the title “Crosss” (1999), with three ‘S’s, I painted the image of a cross over and over again. The work is inspired by a drawing of my son who was then three-year-old. In a recent work I again used the image of multiple crosses as a motif on top of the image of a cemetery. What I am doing here is actually a kind of double copying, that engenders new meaning. Copying is a part of Chinese tradition that I like to practice.



《还是山水画1914-2014》，水彩，17.4×26.5 cm，2015  
Yang Jiechang, These are still Landscapes 1914 – 2014,  
2015, watercolour, 17.4×26.5 cm.



《还是山水画1914-2014》，墨、丙烯、宣纸，120×232 cm，2015  
Yang Jiechang, These are still Landscapes 1914 – 2014, 2015, ink and acrylic on paper, mounted  
on canvas, 120×232 cm.

**HNJ:** In the context of your self-portraits the acts that you document through video play a particular role.

**YJC:** In the life of the Chinese literati, banal everyday acts were understood as a way of communication. The way one performs the tea ceremony can tell a lot about his personality. The representation of such an act shows a facet of one’s personality. The recording of such an act is a very personal thing. The video “Landscape Da Vinci” (2009), for example, shows me shooting with a bow and arrow at a camera with the village Da Vinci in Tuscany as a backdrop. Normally I do archery in my studio in order to

stretch my back after long hours of painting. When I was invited to a low-budget exhibition in Tuscany and considered what was possible to do with the small budget, I thought of performing archery in this landscape resembling the backdrop of the Mona Lisa. Several aspects overlap here: First, the composition of the video image resembles that of the Mona Lisa, and, second, the activity performed by me is authentic and shows my preoccupation at the time—self-cultivation.



Yang Jiechang 楊詰蒼, Landscape Da Vinci, 2009, video, 21 secs, loop (image courtesy the artist)

**HNJ:** And how is this related to your self-portraits?

**YJC:** The practice of Chan-Buddhism and meditation leads to another concept of the self. The self is not separated from the universe; it is the universe, which implies that reflecting about one's self is also reflecting about the universe. By performing archery in Tuscany, archery itself obtained another meaning. The video "Ping Pong" (2007), for example, is about ping pong, a game important in my childhood. I express this relation by showing my bold head jumping like a ping pong ball from left to right and up and down, accompanied by the sound of the ball. The work is not only related to my childhood experience. I had to play ping pong like every other Chinese child at the time. Therefore it is not only a self-portrait but a portrayal of my generation. Further, ping pong also played a role in politics, if we think of the so-called ping-pong diplomacy. Authenticity is the crucial



quality in what concerns these acts recorded as video. Another example: On 9/11 I watched news like everyone, but after having watched the same images over and over again, I realized that there was something wrong. I was furious about what appears to me as a huge lie. The only image that seemed authentic was that of a man covered with dust, running away from the crumbling towers and shouting “Oh, my god”. The best way to express my position seemed to write down this sentence. Thus I did calligraphy and corresponding videos that show me writing and pronouncing “Oh, my god” and later I translated the expression in my mother language Cantonese. The use of the Cantonese expression “Diu”, which actually means “Fuck” makes this work more concrete. I showed it also in Moscow, where I added the Russian equivalent.



《芥子园1》，绢本工笔重彩，110×150 cm，2011 Yang Jiechang, Mustard Seed Garden 1, 2011, ink and mineral colors on silk, mounted on canvas, 110 x 150 cm.

**HNJ:** What is the role of self-portraits in China?

**YJC:** In China the self-portrait as a genre is not important. The only self-portrait I can think of is from the late Qing dynasty. In traditional Chinese paintings, man usually is represented as a part of nature and never detached from nature.

**HNJ:** You said that the notion of the act is important for you.

**YJC:** Not only for me but also for the Chinese literati in general. For them, the act was important as a means of defining their role as a human being. In Chinese you don't say “be a human being” but “become a human being” (*zuo ren* 做人). This means you have to do something to become a human being. The act is therefore a crucial part of being human. This can be discussed from different angles: How can a human being cultivate himself? Being human means to act within society. In traditional China this idea was, of course, based on the concepts created by a cultural elite that believed that their acts, no matter whether writing calligraphy, painting, or drinking tea, had a particular function and aim.



《芥子园3》，绢本工笔重彩，110×150 cm，2011 Yang Jiechang, Mustard Seed Garden 3, 2011, ink and mineral colors on silk, mounted on canvas, 110 x 150 cm.

**HNJ:** Let us come back to the question of how the chosen medium influences content or expression. What changes from one medium to the other and how would you describe the development or history of your self-portraits?

**YJC:** To speak about a history would be too early. I am only at the beginning. At the moment I have the feeling that I can leave everything behind and start anew. Through meditation I achieved the level of not-self, the level where the self does not exist any more. But I will try to describe a development. It starts with the feeling of not accepting myself and of overcoming my fear. When I was young, I was not able to accept myself and I was full of fear. I was afraid to starve, to have no place to live and also to be expelled from the art academy or not to be accepted in general. If you are facing yourself in order to paint a self-portrait, all the everyday problems vanish.

**HNJ:** This reminds me of the title of a film by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, *Angst essen Seele auf* (*Fear Eats the Soul*, 1973).

**YJC:** Yes, that brings it to the point.

**HNJ:** Buddhism implies to find a balance, inner harmony. What else did you try to find this balance?

**YJC:** I tried and discarded a lot of concepts and ideas. After the Cultural Revolution we starved for new concepts, as until then we had only been allowed Mao Zedong Thought. After the opening-up, we were confronted with many Western ideas that we swallowed without being able to digest them all. We had bad stomach problems! I even had ideas of suicide, maybe triggered by my interest in Yukio Mishima and his book *The Golden Pavilion* that I read as a student. It was essential to find a balance. Looking for a way to do so, I discovered meditation, Chan-Buddhism, and Daoism. To free myself from all kind of concepts and obtain a completely empty mind is my ideal today.

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《十一日谈—红岩》，三屏绢本工笔重彩，142×608 cm，2013-2016（142×145 cm / 142×243 cm / 142×201 cm）（Photo: Alan Yang）Yang Jiechang, Tale of the Eleventh Day – Red Cliff, 2013 – 2016, 2016, triptych, ink and mineral colors on silk, mounted on canvas, 142 x 145 cm/ 142 x 243 cm/ 142 x 201 cm, 142 x 608 cm overall. (Photo: Alan Yeung)



《芥子园2》，绢本工笔重彩，110×150 cm，2011 Yang Jiechang, Mustard Seed Garden 2, 2011, ink and mineral colors on silk, mounted on canvas, 110 x 150 cm. (Photo: Marc Damage)



Yang Jiechang gives the background of his participation in the 1989 group exhibition “Les Magiciens de la Terre” at the Centre Georges Pompidou, and the creation of *One Hundred Layers of Ink* series, which has been extremely influential on the development of contemporary Chinese art and recently featured in his 2017 solo show “Earth Roots: Yang Jiechang Paintings, 1985-1999” at INK studio.

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