

THE artist Yun-Fei Ji was riding his electric bike through Beijing last October, snapping pictures of the elaborate parades honoring the 60th anniversary of the People's Republic of China. Suddenly, he said, among the white-uniformed soldiers holding bouquets of red flowers and the rows of bright blue military tanks, "everywhere I looked, I saw either a volunteer guard with a red armband or a policeman or a soldier."



Feeling conflicted about what he considered to be an overzealous display of control by the Chinese authorities, Mr. Ji, 46, said he rode home to place an online order for "The 120 Days of Sodom," the scandalous 18th-century French novel by the Marquis de Sade. "For some reason," explained Mr. Ji, who was born in Beijing but is now an American citizen, "whenever I go to China, I feel the need to transgress."

In the weeks that followed, Mr. Ji began to fill the walls of his temporary Beijing studio with sketches, and eventually paintings, of emaciated figures that appear by turns docile and domineering. These works, along with a 10-foot horizontal scroll, "Migrants of the Three Gorges Dam," critiquing the dam's social and environmental impact, are among the highlights of "Mistaking Each Other for Ghosts," a selection of Mr. Ji's recent work that opened Friday at the James Cohan Gallery in Chelsea.

Mr. Ji's subtle, subversive watercolors have appeared in important contemporary art roundups like the 2002 Whitney Biennial, and last year in the "Medals of Dishonour" show at the British Museum and in "Chelsea Visits Havana" at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Cuba. The Contemporary Art Museum in St. Louis organized a 2004 solo exhibit of his work, "The Empty City," which traveled to the Rose Art Museum in Waltham, Mass., among other institutions. And in 2005 the American Academy in Rome awarded Mr. Ji a Prix de Rome. Although he is less known in China than in the West, a June show of his paintings at James Cohan's sister gallery in Shanghai, coinciding with the World's Fair there, may change that.

While Mr. Ji has spent his career searching for images that convey his ambivalence about what he calls "heavy authority," until recently his most perverse act may have been his choice of traditional Chinese landscape painting as his preferred medium.

“What’s fascinating about Yun-Fei is that he would turn to radical antiquarianism, when the society he’s from really hates that,” said May Castleberry, an editor for the Museum of Modern Art’s Library Council Editions, which recently published a limited-edition book of his new work.



James Cohan Gallery, New York. Detail from the 10-foot horizontal scroll “Migrants of the Three Gorges Dam.”

During a recent interview at his New York gallery, Mr. Ji agreed. “When I was growing up during the Cultural Revolution,” he said, “if you were a traditional landscape painter, you could really get in trouble.”

During subsequent decades, as Chinese artists gravitated toward Western approaches to art, “again traditional painting was not fashionable,” he said. In the past couple of years, however, “people in China have become more interested in looking at these traditions,” he said.

In “Migrants of the Three Gorges Dam,” a project that Mr. Ji began several years ago under the auspices of MoMA, he once again uses traditional means to explore contemporary issues. Hand printed from 500 carved woodblocks made by the esteemed Rongbaozhai printing and publishing house, Mr. Ji’s mounted scroll portrays flooded landscapes and dispossessed farmers alongside his calligraphic descriptions of the flooding of the Yangtze River and reports on the displacement of inhabitants of the area based on his own interviews, research and observations.

Yet Mr. Ji said he was less interested in criticizing the world’s largest hydroelectric power plant — long a symbol of progress in China — than he was in revealing the interconnection between humans and their natural environment. “The belief among ancient scholars,” he said, “is that nature offers an ethical model that we should follow in human society. A horizontal line, for example, in Chinese calligraphy, is like a cloud formation, or a natural, living form.”

Having just arrived in New York this month after an eight-month stay in China, Mr. Ji, whose brown tweed cap was offset by a V-neck sweater and sensible sneakers, unrolled a bundle of new paintings, which he had carried on the airplane. One of these, “The Garden Party,” reflected his recent musings on Sade’s work. An apparently bucolic scene based on a recent visit to the ancient gardens of Suzhou, the watercolor contrasts overflowing flowerpots and blooming cherry trees

with decadent-looking figures in various stages of dress. Among them a naked figure crawls on all fours through a puddle with a bag over his head and his pants bunched around his ankles. Framing the image are excerpts from Sade's text rendered into Mr. Ji's elegant calligraphy. Offering a rough translation, he read: "Your duty is to serve my pleasure, and to take a lot of abuse. If you complain, you'll be destroyed."

Reading further, in silence, Mr. Ji, a soft-spoken man with a wry sense of humor, chuckled. "The writing is very vulgar," he said.



James Cohan Gallery, New York. A detail from the 10-foot horizontal scroll "Migrants of the Three Gorges Dam."

He spent his early childhood at an army base, where his father served as a military doctor. He was 7, he said, when his mother, a draftsman in an architectural firm, was sent for re-education in a labor camp. "I don't know what she did," he said.

During her two-year absence Mr. Ji lived with his grandparents in Hangzhou, which from 1127 to 1279 was the ancient capital city of the southern Song Dynasty. There his grandfather, who taught high school, introduced him to calligraphy. And on hot summer nights, since "we didn't have a TV or even a radio," Mr. Ji said, his grandmother would sit outside among their neighbors "sipping a tea and telling ghost stories." Drowned ghosts, hoping to reincarnate themselves by inhabiting the bodies of living children, figured repeatedly in his grandmother's many stories. And they clearly struck a nerve; Mr. Ji's landscapes are often strewn with fantastical chimeras, ghostlike figures with animal bodies and heads.

Mr. Ji attended the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, where most of his teachers had been trained at Stalinist art schools in the Soviet Union during the 1950s. Not surprisingly, social realism was the reigning style. Although classical art was dismissed as backward, Mr. Ji said Chung Jun Quai, a costume and lighting designer for films, taught him "that reading a painting is like reading a poem."

When the University of Arkansas offered Mr. Ji a scholarship in 1986, he said, the decision to leave China was difficult: “There was a lot of excitement when I was in art school. But I also felt this pressure that was really restrictive. Psychologically, it felt very uncomfortable.”



James Cohan Gallery, New York. “The Garden Party.” “Mistaking Each Other for Ghosts,” a selection of Mr. Ji’s recent work, is at the James Cohan Gallery in Chelsea.

Once in the United States, however, he discovered the German Expressionists George Grosz and Otto Dix, and the American postwar painter Philip Guston, who combined humorous, even cartoony iconography with masterly painting. Remaining in America after he graduated, Mr. Ji was eventually granted citizenship and moved to Brooklyn. Even so, depictions of his native China continue to dominate his work. Referring to “a huge corruption scandal” unfolding in the city of Chongqing during his recent visit, Mr. Ji asked, “What do you do when so much control and power is concentrated in the hands of a few corrupt officials?”

Without waiting for an answer, he added, “That’s why the Marquis de Sade made sense to me as a kind of response.”