Momus

The Photograph is a Hinge: Taca Sui Traces a Cultural Slippage

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But when men do not forget what can be forgotten, but forget what cannot be forgotten—that may be called true forgetting. – Zhuangzi

A two-dimensional mountainous shape glows against a blackened sky. Its silvery texture slowly dissipates as it rises into a wisp of form. Dots, suggesting stars, scatter around in specks of white and grey, while overhanging branches dip in and out of clarity. What is depicted in this photograph is not a nebulous dream scene but a stone at a river's edge. Shot from above, it reveals the descent of rock beneath the murky water of the Wen River in China, a work from Taca Sui's series titled *Steles – Huang Yi Project* (2015), as exhibited at Chambers Fine Art, in New York City, this Spring. The photograph, a perfect emblem for Sui's body of work, defines a quotidian space while suggesting a hazy accumulation of durations, somehow managing to appear both precise and indefinite. Yet despite this visual clarity, the works become more strongly about the temporal slippage of a culture's history, and so evoke an oncoming absence. It is as if, through the power of mechanical observation, Taca is attempting to bring back what was lost, or what is in the process of being loss, rather than memorializing the present.

The photographs, then, are like footprints in the snow pointing to the creature that left them, ultimately making present their absence. Exploring the appearance of such an event, the images become an iteration of the concept of *shul*. As Stephen Batchelor, a scholar and Buddhist teacher, writes of the term according to the 14th-century Tibetan philosopher Tsongkhapa:

This term is defined as "an impression": a mark that remains after that which made it has passed by – a footprint, for example. In other contexts, shul *is used to describe the scarred hollow in the ground where a house once stood, the channel worn through rock where a river runs in flood, the indentation in the grass where an animal slept last night. All these are* shul*: the impression of something that used to be there.*

To begin his project, Taca followed in the footsteps of Huang Yi, an imperial bureaucrat from the late-18th, early-19th centuries. An amateur painter, archeologist, and poet, Yi took particular interest in the *steles*, carved stone and wooden monuments in the mountains of China, dedicated to historical figures and events. Fascinated by the cracked and slowly fading surfaces, he undertook their memorialization. During his travels, Huang Yi wrote of his journey in a diary and produced four-hundred rubbings transcribed directly from the steles themselves. As Lillian Lan-Yang Tseng writes in her essay *Retrieving the Past, Inventing the Memorable* (2003), "these rubbings – direct impressions of stone steles – were the most reliable reproductions of monuments in an age when photography was not yet known." However, their reliability would not be enough for Huang Yi; he would go on to produce an album of 24 paintings, each compounded with the experiences accumulated along his journeys and recorded in his diary.

Taca used Huang Yi's writings as a guide for his trek to the steles and, like him, made visual records along the way. His photographs mimic the original rubbings in their specificity, sharpness, and detail. His use of silver Baryta Inkjet paper gives the works a shimmering surface similar to toned chemical-based gelatin silver prints, and recalls the gold-toned photographs of Linda Connor. Like Connor, Taca's depictions of landscapes often include, but are not dominated by, significant cultural symbolism and architecture. An air of time immemorial pervades the works, suggesting a painful longing in Taca as he roams the Chinese mountains with Huang Yi's ghost, recording an increasingly disappearing past.

Naturally, Taca's photographs begin to take on the characteristics of Huang Yi's paintings. These ink-on-paper pieces, called *Dong-ju* style because of their loose brushwork, expressed a view, usually from a distance, of a particular scene recalled by Huang. Despite the visually detailed nature of Taca's photographs, a similar poetic and narrative approach to the scene announces itself in both content as well as certain formal elements (elongated prints, elevated perspective). In one particular photograph, titled *Shicong* (2015), the view is of a mountainous forest, with rocky peaks surging up through the foliage. The distant vantage point looks down from above: spatial depth appears greatly condensed, most likely by a telephoto lens. This collapse of distance is reminiscent of the compositional methods of traditional Chinese landscape painting, suggesting a view that Taca may have shared with Huang Yi, despite the separation in time. But there is a tinge of the modern here that marks that abyss between the two men: drainage pipes in the lower left of the frame and graffiti in the top right. The presence of these two details suggests the slow withdrawal of the steles, and thus the past, from the modern constructions that appear to replace them.

The mountains of China are in a state of continuous process. Geologic time shapes them in durations beyond the human perspective. Changes invisible in real time leave signs, like striae in the walls of the Grand Canyon, or the degraded characters subtly evident in a stele. These signs, despite their slow change, provide a cosmology of cultural history as it is embedded in a particular place. Taca's photographs, impressions in light of terrestrial structures, appear on the surface to be immutable. The evasive nature of the surface undermines this notion, however. The silver Baryta paper acts somewhat like a daguerreotype: it must be directly looked at to be seen. Otherwise, the images become awash in reflective gradients of silver tone. The physical approach to the photograph stages the experience of clarity emerging from a metallic fog, only to fall back into the haze when one moves to the next image. Somehow, the photograph dances between existence and nonexistence, like a mind struggling to grasp a memory that has left a scarred hollow in the subconscious.

The pain of this weaving, an oscillation between the concrete and the indistinct, pulses throughout the exhibition. Both Huang Yi and Taca went to great lengths to visually preserve artifacts, and their contextual surroundings that were fading from view. For Taca, the camera is a tool for conjuring the past in a fleeting present and recognizing his cultural legacy. His photographs, with their extreme definition – as if visual precision might arrest the natural degradation of things – become instead seductive masks hiding the pain of loss, and reveal the inevitability of the human surrender to time's slow organic dynamism. As Dàoist

philosopher Zhuangzi wrote in the 3rd century BCE, “A state in which ‘this’ and ‘that’ no longer find their opposites is called the hinge of the Way. When the hinge is fitted into the socket, it can respond endlessly. Its right, then, is a single endlessness and its wrong, too, is a single endlessness. So I say, the best thing to use is clarity.” The photographs here become the hinge, clarity bracketed by the undifferentiated, a transmission of *shul* by light. Like the stone in Taca Sui’s *Wen River*, one can only watch as the sharpened present withdraws into the increasingly darkened water and so the depths of time.