

Yang Yang, "Hao Liang: Circular Pond," *Artforum*, September 3, 2019

ARTFORUM

Hao Liang: Circular Pond *Aurora Museum, Shanghai*

Yang Yang



View of "Hao Liang," 2019. From left: *Lunar Corona No. 6*, 2018; *Lunar Corona No. 5*, 2018, *Lunar Corona No. 4*, 2018; *Lunar Corona No. 3*, 2018.

How to account for the use of traditional techniques and styles in contemporary art? Many artists are certain of their neutrality and disavow any underlying ideological connotation; others, like Hao Liang, advocate a distinct historical agenda — to investigate the insurmountable chasm between modern China and its ancient past. The artist's rise to prominence over the past decade can be primarily attributed to his revival of Chinese ink landscape painting on silk hand scrolls. To cultivate a sense of interconnectedness across human societies, he revolutionizes the somewhat rigid form of narrative prescribed by the scroll's horizontal format by conflating different historical scenarios into an anachronistic medley. His earlier work *The Virtuous Being*, 2015, for example, is a thirty-foot-long scroll charting the ostensibly seamless transition of a Ming-dynasty private resort into a present-day public amusement park. More recently, in *Streams and Mountains Without End*, 2017, he employed the circle as the dominant visual motif, sporadically dispersing the shape across the scroll to guide the viewer's attention through his depiction of a desolate landscape; the circle, according to Hao, symbolizes the aspiration for certain metaphysical ideals in the compositional experiments of Wassily Kandinsky and in the art and writing of Dong Qichang, the Ming-dynasty painter and art theorist.

The first half of "Circular Pond," an exhibition in two successive parts, employed an analogous logic: Derivatives of the ancient jade disk (*bi*) emerged as the common feature among otherwise diverse works of ink painting, rubbing, and collotype printing. Together, the specific art mediums chosen and other allusions to traditional cultural concepts anchored the exhibition. Not

only did the show's title refer to an ancient architectural structure (surrounded by water and therefore resembling the shape of a *bi*) designed to sustain a Confucian learning environment, but the setup of the exhibition, which unfolded across a horizontal strip of wall and demanded a reading sequence from right to left, was also evocative of the unfurling of a hand scroll. The first chapter, "Evolution," featured a grouping of raw jade materials and two juxtaposed pages reproduced, respectively, from Western and Chinese research publications: *The Bishop Collection: Investigations and Studies in Jade*, edited by George Frederick Kunz (1906), and *Textual Research of Ancient Jade with Illustrations* by Wu Dacheng (1889). Although the two encyclopedic attempts at classification and taxonomy were made roughly around the turn of the twentieth century, they embody drastically different philosophies. While the candid delineation of two jade measuring rulers taken from the Chinese book instills a sense of ideality and conformity, a quest for concreteness characterizes the other study, where an array of jade axes from different cultural origins are shape-fitted into a composition that presumably facilitates the comprehension of their relative scales. The artist continued this comparative approach in the ensuing chapter, "Lunar Corona," placing an exhaustively detailed lunar map engraving by the seventeenth-century astronomer Jean-Dominique Cassini alongside the artist's own illustration of a Han-dynasty jade disk, whose intricate pattern manifests a desire to penetrate natural phenomena while functioning as a device via which one may calibrate one's bearings in the world.

After a succession of small-scale, dark-hued ink paintings further down the wall, the exhibition concluded with a photographic portrait of the artist's grandfather, the film director Hao Weiguang, captured on set in 1948, two years before the Communist ascendancy to power culminated in the proclamation of the People's Republic of China. Showing his standing amid a stream of sailing ships while wearing a bucket hat, the photo calls to mind the traditional image of the fisherman, which in the lexicon of Chinese poetry and lyrical prose signifies the recluse shunning the volatile turmoil of the outside world. This nostalgic, benign appearance belies the poignant reality that the filmmaker belonged to the generation who lived through the most tumultuous years of the country's passage to modernity. Such an irony-ridden ending raised the question of whether it is legitimate to pronounce certain aesthetic conventions unproductive, if not obsolete. Instead, a perhaps more relevant query arises: What other narrative knots pinion the harmonious blends of streams and mountains, still waiting to be disentangled?