

## **FRAGMENTS/CULTURAL LANDSCAPES**

In his new photographic series contemporary Chinese photographer Huang Xu has created images both arresting and mysterious. Using nothing more than discarded plastic shopping bags the artist has arranged these items like the sumptuous folds of delicate silken garments. Hanging in space this most common of materials is here transformed into diaphanous and indeterminate shapes, closer in appearance to vaporous wisps of cloud than the universal holdall of the world's daily goods.

Recalling the traditional fabrics of this country's imperial past, Xu's aesthetic program is unquestionably Chinese in character. The dynamic movements expressed in these interlocking fragments are similar to the rhythmic energies of ancient Chinese calligraphy, martial arts and acrobatics. Simultaneously their appearance seems reminiscent of 19<sup>th</sup> Century spirit photography. Xu's images rise from their darkened settings like spirits in a drawing room spirit reading. Rather like billowing clouds their masterful formulations give rise to all manner of possibilities.

Were we to ask these apparitions what message they come to deliver one suspects their response to be a plea for environmental sanity. After all, the bags from which they are composed contribute daily to the world's accumulation of refuse and ever increasing rubbish heaps. They are what we will become. The crux of Xu's images hinges on their positioning between an historically laden aesthetic and a material that threatens to disrupt our current social order. Here one must acknowledge Xu as a Chinese contemporary artist whose work reflects critically on his nation's rush to modernity, even in the face of its long history of self-reliance. Where once the world had an insatiable appetite for Chinese silk (from which the great old road takes its name) now there is an even greater demand for all things cheap and disposable.

In addition to his fragments series, Huang Xu has turned his attention to the tradition of Chinese scholars' rocks or Gongshi. Also known as Spirit Rocks, these occurring minerals were once used by Chinese scholars as an aid to their daily meditations. Similar to the concerns at play in Xu's earlier series this new photographic suite brings to light the extent of the artist's preoccupation with the philosophical traditions of his native homeland. Viewed together they provide an insightful reflection on the ever changeable nature of matter, moving from conditions of solidity to flux and decay.

Huang Xu's work looks to the past as a way of negotiating the present and the future. In this he asserts a language rooted in nature, at once complex yet strangely reductive in form. Through this he has mirrored many of the contradictions inherent in Chinese culture today.

Damian Smith, 2008