

Visual Arts
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5 great reasons to see Seattle Asian Art Museum's new exhibition

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Ai Weiwei's "Colored Vases," 2010, is part of Seattle Asian Art Museum's exhibition "Beyond the Mountain: Contemporary Chinese Artists on the Classical Forms." In the background is "Some/One," a 2001 sculpture by Korean... (Natali Wiseman / Seattle Art Museum) **More** 

By [Gemma Alexander](#)

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After a three-year closure for renovation, the Seattle Asian Art Museum was only open for one month before the first pandemic lockdown. Since then, SAAM has ridden the waves of the pandemic with a now-familiar mixture of reduced hours and social-distancing protocols that made it possible, but not necessarily easy, to visit the [renovated museum](#). The new special exhibition “Beyond the Mountain” will be the first chance for many of us to see the new SAAM, and it offers five great reasons to do it now.

“Beyond the Mountain: Contemporary Chinese Artists on the Classical Forms” exhibits contemporary works that interpret and examine the traditions of classical Chinese art. Currently featuring five Chinese artists working in a variety of media, several pieces will be rotated with others by the same artists this winter when work from a sixth artist, Tai Xiangzhou, will be added. The exhibition will run through the end of June 2023.

The immersive, multimedia exhibition is small — a casual viewer could survey the handful of pieces in minutes — but it’s one that rewards a more thoughtful approach, revealing new layers and details the longer you look. Each artist relates classical forms with timely themes, addressing topics from street protest to quarantine. In presenting the works, curator Foong Ping incorporated ideas generated by her students at the University of Washington. One of those ideas was interpreting the exhibition by pairing the traditional forms with the thematic challenges presented by the contemporary works (e.g. “ink/protest,” pairing the traditional use of ink with the contemporary theme of protest). In a tour of the exhibition, Foong talked about the artworks under each of those pairings.

ink/protest

“When Americans think of Chinese art, they think of ink on paper,” says Foong. But artist Chen Xiaoxiong uses the iconic Chinese medium for global matters. Chen’s brush paintings are modeled on social media images of mass protests around the world. SAAM is displaying five of them now; another five will be shown in the second rotation. More are redigitized in a video montage accompanied by a Taiwanese version of “Do You Hear the People Sing” from “Les Misérables” — a song that has been sung by protesters from Wisconsin to Hong Kong. Surprisingly, one of the most violent-appearing images depicts water pistol games at a Pride Parade. “There’s a side message that it’s easy to misunderstand what we see on the internet,” says Foong.

artifact/culture

For “Colored Vases” iconoclast Ai Weiwei doused clay pots — ostensibly Han Dynasty artifacts — in industrial paint in a challenge to the fundamental values of Chinese society. Did he really deface 2,000-year-old archaeological treasures? Foong says she chooses not to find out, “because it doesn’t change his message.” These pots were on view at SAAM before the renovation. This time, they are arranged in the shape of a hiking trail to echo the lines of a mountaintop in another provocative piece.

proverb/nature

By stacking their naked bodies on a mountaintop, performance artist Zhang Huan and friends challenge the height of the mountain. Documented photographically, they have embodied the Chinese idiom, “Beyond the mountain, there are higher mountains yet.” Foong explains, “He’s translating an idea into a performance. It means, ‘Don’t get too big for your britches.’ ” When the artworks rotate in winter, this photograph will be replaced with one documenting Zhang’s performance in Seattle 10 years ago.

landscape/cityscape

Foong says most Chinese people will identify the classical Song dynasty landscape, which she says emphasizes how “you are so small compared to the importance and immortality of the landscape,” as the essence of Chinese art. At first glance, Yang Yongliang’s short films resemble GIFs of old landscape paintings. But on closer inspection, vehicles rush down the flowing streams and thousands of

photographs of skyscrapers comprise the sheer rock faces of the mountains. “Incredibly immersive, they force you to slow down and reflect,” Foong says.

landscape/escape

Like Yang, Hong Kong artist Lam Tung Pang works in the context of the landscape tradition. But instead of urbanization, Lam’s “The Great Escape” responds to the claustrophobia of pandemic lockdown. Lam’s site-specific commissioned installation “explores the idea of retreat into nature. The body is in lockdown, but the mind is somewhere else,” says Foong. She adds, “This work contains many secrets. There are so many details.”

In “The Great Escape,” painted imagery is projected on the walls of a room-sized paper lantern. The lantern contains a model that evokes a hermit’s mountain retreat. The temptation to enter the off-limits interior for a closer look is strong, even for adults. But there’s just as much to see outside; thematically related artworks — including tiny zoo animals escaping a paper bag and a model astronaut escaping the Earth entirely — are mounted on the gallery walls.

“Beyond the Mountain”

Through June 30, 2023; Seattle Asian Art Museum, 1400 E. Prospect St., Seattle; suggested admission \$9.99-\$17.99; masks highly encouraged, with mask-required hours third Saturdays at 9 a.m.; 206-654-3210, seattleartmuseum.org

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