

Teaching

Duan Jianyu

ARTIST

DUAN Jianyu

(dwan jen-yu)

段建宇



Duan Jianyu

BORN

1970, Zhengzhou, China

LIVES & WORKS

Guangzhou

THEMES

History
Place
Symbols

ART MEDIUMS

Painting
Sculpture

“Whether it’s the simple and honest countryside in the North or the delicate and beautiful scenery in the South, both landscapes are facing significant change; the old China, made up of lots of rural towns, each rich in its own folklore and local custom, is slowly ebbing away.”¹

ABOUT THE ARTIST AND WORK

Duan Jianyu was born in 1970 in Zhengzhou, the capital city of Henan Province in China. Henan is located in the central part of the country and was once considered the birthplace of ancient Chinese civilization, but it was largely left behind during China’s rapid industrial growth in the 1990s. In 1995 Duan moved to the city of Guangzhou in southern China, where she currently resides, to study oil painting.

Duan’s hometown forms the central theme of many of her works. *Spring River in the Flower Moon Night I* (2017) depicts a pastoral scene but includes details that reveal social commentary. A kneeling woman in the center of the composition carries a “red-white-blue bag,” a cheap and durable tote used to carry commercial goods by rural workers in Guangzhou. Two figures lie on a wheeled pallet, a tool that commonly is used in warehouses and that serves as a makeshift means of transportation in urban centers for people who are homeless. Duan’s work connects present-day marginalized figures to mythical figures in Chinese art and literary history. A woman in the foreground has long, flowing black hair—a symbol for a fairy, ghost, or magical being—and the leaping rabbits at the bottom of the canvas suggest she might be Chang’e, the goddess of the moon. Also influenced by classical styles of Chinese painting and Socialist Realist propaganda, Duan creates fantastic characters who are models of resistance to systems that seek to eliminate misfits from society.

The sculpture *Picnic 1* (2018) was made to be shown with paintings from the series *Spring River in the Flower Moon Night* (2017–18). In the sculpture, the carrots take on humanlike forms and sprawl leisurely across the gallery floor, further confusing the boundaries between human and nature, rural and urban, real and imaginary. The series title was borrowed from the seventh-century Chinese poet Zhang Ruoxu’s poem of the same name—an influential classic that is frequently adapted into Chinese music or dance to evoke nationalist sentiment. Duan’s appropriation of the title hints at the way culture can be packaged, circulated, consumed, and recycled: “Appropriating popular culture is a technique you often see in my work. The lowbrow sometimes serves as a kind of optimism.”²

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- 1 “Duan Jianyu: An Equivocal Status Quo,” Sotheby’s, catalogue note, September 30, 2017, <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/lot.1043.html/2017/modern-contemporary-art-evening-sale-hk0736>.
 - 2 “*One Hand Clapping*: Duan Jianyu,” Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, July 2, 2018, video, 0:59, <https://www.guggenheim.org/video/one-hand-clapping-duan-jianyu>.



Duan Jianyu, *Spring River in the Flower Moon Night 1*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 180 × 250 cm. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Collection 2018.14

View and Discuss

→ Look at the painting *Spring River in the Flower Moon Night I* (2017). Look closely at the figures in the painting.

What do you notice about their poses, clothing, or expressions? Duan often paints fictional characters inspired by literature, history, and mythology. Which figures look fictional? Why?

→ Examine the background of the painting, paying close attention to the following symbols:

MOON

A large full moon occupies the upper third of the painting. What do you notice about the moon?

HAIR

The long, weaving strands of black hair form an important visual connection in this painting between the figures and the landscape. What does the hair make you think of?

INSTRUMENTS

There are two figures playing Chinese musical instruments in this painting. One holds a *pipa*, or a lute made with four strings. The other has a *dizi*, a flute traditionally constructed with bamboo. What do you notice about the figures playing these instruments? Why might the artist include ancient or outdated objects in her painting?



Chinese *pipa* ("lute"), from the Ming dynasty (1368–1644)

View and Discuss



Duan Jianyu, *Picnic 1*, 2018. Bronze with acrylic, dimensions variable. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Collection 2018.15

→ Look at the sculpture *Picnic 1* (2018). Duan envisioned this work as part of “a public square with people roaming about.”³

Ask students to imagine the carrot sculptures as people. What do they notice about poses of the carrots? What might they be doing? Share the title, *Picnic 1*. How might this title add to or change the narrative?

Classroom Activities

Community

Duan depicts her hometown, comprising a rural population left behind in a rapidly changing, urban society.

Create a list to compare and contrast: What are the ways that rural areas are different from urban areas in your region?

Write a Story

In *Picnic 1*, Duan uses anthropomorphic carrots to tell a story. Define anthropomorphism: presenting a nonhuman thing with human characteristics.



Duan Jianyu, *Garden of Secrets No. 9*, 2017 (study for *Spring River in the Flower Moon Night*, 2017–18). Acrylic on paper, 38 x 26.2 cm

Choose an object or group of objects and write an anthropomorphic narrative. Look back at *Picnic 1*. What are the benefits of using anthropomorphic objects, instead of human characters, to tell a story?

Chinese Mythology

Duan's works draw on Chinese mythical folklore, intertwining it with an imagined future. One folk reference is the mother goddess Nüwa, who is often depicted as a serpent with a female head. Another mythological allusion is to the moon goddess Chang'e, who, according to legend, swallowed an immortality elixir and fled to the moon, where she is often depicted with her companion, the Jade Rabbit.

Look at the images of the Chinese folk goddesses and compare to Duan's figures. What commonalities do you see?

Popular Culture

Watch a video about Duan on the Guggenheim's website: [guggenheim.org/video/one-hand-clapping-duan-jianyu](https://www.guggenheim.org/video/one-hand-clapping-duan-jianyu). In the video, Duan talks about appropriating from popular culture in her work.

What sources from popular culture do artists use today? Ask students to make a list, including, for example, comic books, music lyrics, and video games. Challenge them to create an artwork inspired by a resource from popular culture.

Resources

Websites

- Duan's Website. <http://www.duanjianyu.cn/>.

Videos

- SinoVision. "One Hand Clapping." May 9, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vjnjTrk5Mu4>.
- Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. "One Hand Clapping: Duan Jianyu." July 2, 2018. <https://www.guggenheim.org/video/one-hand-clapping-duan-jianyu>.

Articles

- Dematté, Monica. "Apotheosis of the Imagination: Duan Jianyu's Approach to Painting." June 4, 2011. http://www.duanjianyu.cn/article_view_en.asp?sort_id=30&id=180&display_page=3&aa=1&url=index_en.asp?id1=30@sort1=2.
- Pu Hong. "Duan Jianyu: Attaching Reality to Surface." *LEAP*, no. 19, May 20, 2013. <http://www.leapleapleap.com/2013/05/duan-jianyu-attaching-reality-to-surface/>.
- Smith, Karen. "A Potent Force: Duan Jianyu and Hu Xiaoyuan." 2013. www.duanjianyu.cn/article_view_en.asp?displaypage=1&sort_id=30&id=180&url=index_en.asp?id1+30@sort1=2.

Books

- Weng, Xiaoyu and Hou Hanru, eds. *One Hand Clapping*. Exh. cat. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2018.

Visit guggenheim.org/teachingmaterials for high-resolution images, audio, and video, as well as additional historical and contextual information about this artist and others featured in *Teaching Modern and Contemporary Asian Art*.

Note: On page 2, the artist's surname is capitalized to differentiate it from her given name. Colloquial phonetic pronunciations are included, rather than versions in the standard International Phonetic Alphabet, to help teachers pronounce names that may be unfamiliar.

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