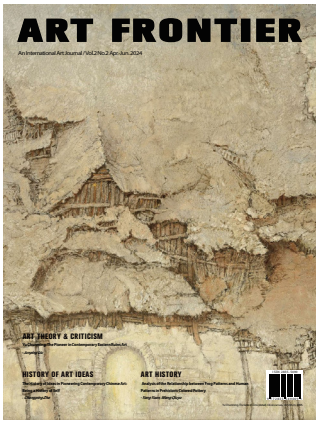


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Yu Chunming: The Pioneer in Contemporary Eastern Ruins Art

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Abstract

Though the artwork of Yu Chunming is a recreation of historical images, the contemporary style reflects the developing progress of art globalization. His artwork presents an overall sense of tenderness, desolation, and mystique, as well as Chinese-ness embedded within the Eastern cultural settings, where the theoretical foundation hails from the Voluntarism coined by Schopenhauer, and the unique Eastern aesthetics—the Zen aesthetics of Zhuang Zhou, which emphasizes self-perception and intuition awareness. However, what distinguishes his artwork from the Western Ruins Art, is that the Eastern Ruins Art of Yu Chunming is acquired with cognition of Ruins Art under the philosophical concept of "Unity of Human and Humanity," as well as a sense of Eastern regional culture symbols and sentimental identifications emerging from patriotism. His art language is mature, with a strong graphic program as well as a distinct artistic style. In spite of the irretrievable vanishment of Ruins Art during the progress of globalization, urbanization and modernization, the paradox of modernity has often led us to linger on Ruins Art. This long-accumulated cultural symbol evokes emotional memories and cultural sources that could never be erased. Also, we often compare these two as naturally as conducting an introspection between living a real life during the day, and dreaming under the darkness of night. The graphical images of Yu Chunming's artwork are possessed with a profound ideology, strong visual impact, and abundant contemporary sense of color. It's equipped with unique Chinese characteristics, and integrates the contemporary metaphysical school of art as well as the ideology of spiritual landscape art at the same time. It even coincides with the artistic philosophy of the School of Ruins Art in art history.

Key Words

Yu Chunming, Ruins Art, Chinese-ness, Mystique

Many have mentioned Yu Chunming and his works to me before, and some have also introduced me to how his works are dedicated to ancient Chinese housing and dwellings. With the invitation of museum director Mr. Shu, I visited Yu Chunming's art exhibition, which was filled with questions. All the doubts that I had before were answered after visiting his exhibition. I have hesitated to define an artist and his/her artwork (within the Theory of Art History) by "what he/she paints." For example, the sunflower theme of Van Gogh is particularly renowned; however, Art History professionals have defined him as a key figure of "Post-Impressionism." Thus, after seeing Yu Chunming's artwork, I completely changed my mindset and began viewing him as a "dwelling painter". Through the long-gone dwellings, streets, ruins, and regional landscape symbols, Yu Chunming has unveiled the emotions and spirit behind these landscapes, and emphasized the historicity, immutability, and imperishability of the landscapes through the realist style reflected by oil paintings. Most of them are abounded with Eastern atmosphere of mystique and tranquility. Fan Jingzhong has defined Yu Chunming's artwork as "the glory shines like history and myth." He describes, "Mr. Yu allows us to peek at dwellings all around China. The viewers are most definitely familiar with these kinds of scenes. Though the dwellings are already

decadent, even completely vanished, these images vaguely concatenate into incessant memories. Those dreamy touches are like déjà vu, but with a sense of uncertainty, almost like the feeling that the great poet Li Bai had once described, 'Walking under the moon while slightly tipsy, heading west to the winehouse; unwittingly forgetting men and matters, being outside the world.' All the things captured, from waterside pavilions, cloud rooms, and shrines, to vast corridors, stockaded villages, and ancient ramparts, are all embedded with the spirits of the ancestors."[1]

The subject matter of Yu Chunming's "elapsed ruins" and his philosophy of "searching for spirituality in landscape art" reminds me of the school of Ruin Art in the Western Art History. I again looked up the related topics in the history of art and aesthetics with this question in mind. The theoretical system of Ruins Art is quite intact and well-grounded. Yu Chunming's artistic philosophy coincides with Western Ruins Art, and he has also acquired a clear and cutting-edge artistic awareness of the urbanized cultural process. He is adept at illustrating the regional images of East Asia through contemporary art. The ancient Chinese dwellings, regional landscapes ,and local customs accumulated by history are precisely reproduced and represented in his works through visual art full of spirituality. His works have formed a complete image system of itself, with a transcultural element and novelty embedded inside the usual and the unfamiliar, in which every viewer is deeply moved by this kind of unique spiritual landscape art.

1. The Positioning of Eastern School of Ruins Paintings and Traces of Art History

The Western landscape paintings had been separated from figure paintings, and the same applied to Chinese Shan Shui paintings. The backgrounds of Leonardo da Vinci's paintings *Virgin of the Rocks* and *Mona Lisa* had been the prototype of landscape paintings. Then, we can see traces of landscape paintings' growing maturity in the background of Pieter Bruegel's works *The Peasant Dance* and *The Blind Leading the Blind*. In particular, Giovanni Bellini's paintings of landscape nature became the sources of the development of spiritual landscape paintings. By the 17th and 18th centuries, Jacob van Ruisdael and Meindert Hobbema were among the pioneers of developing landscape paintings to a matured level, where artists and viewers then realized the uniqueness of this aesthetic. Later in history, the Barbizon School emerged as a self-contained school of art. The development of Western art history into the 19th century, the emergence of the Hudson River School in the United States became an important school of painting. After emigrating with the discovery of the New World, the early painters began to depict the landscape of the Hudson River Valley where they lived, revealing the emigrants exploring their relationship with nature. This is seen as an early process of the native American art culture establishment, whether the Barbizon School or the Hudson River School, both of which were landscapes with a

tendency towards objectivity.

Most importantly, there was another transformation of landscape paintings in the 18th century, which is the development of landscape paintings led by the German Romantic landscape painter Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840), who was arguably the first artist to depict transcendental landscapes, depicting dilapidated buildings, ruins, snow, ice, rocks, and lonely people—that is, the emergence of landscape paintings infused with subjectivity, presenting an overall mystical atmosphere to his paintings. This provided a solid foundation for the redevelopment of the Metaphysical School of Art as well as Ruins Art in the 20th century, thus becoming the representation of spiritual landscape paintings.

Following this lead, we have found the definitions for "Ruins": "Sou Fujimoto stated that ruins are both the end and the origin of architecture. Ruins are imperfect objects that encompass accidents; precisely because of this, they can transform into artificial caves. Architecture must carefully design ruins. Spain once possessed a brilliant industrial civilization, but with the advent of the information age, declining old industries left behind a vast amount of abandoned space. With the rise of industrial heritage tourism abroad, these architectural ruins have once again attracted significant attention."[2]

The Ruins Art emerged in Europe during the 20th century, of which the artworks often depicted architectural ruins from the Classical Antiquity, thus expressing the spiritual core of historicity and philosophy. "The School of Ruins Painting is inextricably linked to the Metaphysical Painting (Pittura Metafisica) established in the early 20th century. The painters of the Metaphysical School had their unique ways of exploring the metaphysical world: Giorgio de Chirico specialized in the 'defamiliarization' of familiar elements in life, such as Italian piazzas, sculptures, and human figures. Giorgio Morandi focused on the grey color of lower purity, and explored the metaphysical realm in the field of color."[3] Extending from the ruins of civilization to the phenomenon of ruins in decaying spiritual and material states, Yu Chunming also uses the language of metaphysical painting in his exploration of ancient Chinese dwellings and architectural ruins. He also applies the perception of "the unity of heaven and man" under the Eastern concept to ruins; based on the Eastern interpretation of ruins, he aims at the remains of ancient Chinese dwellings and explores the metaphysical philosophical ideas through the ruins of ancient Chinese civilization.

Given that Yu Chunming grew up in China, it is inevitable that his art is based on the regional cultural background and traces of Chinese art. By the time Chinese art reached the end of the Qing Dynasty, it had already represented or reflected a lack of vitality and an incapability for innovation. The first Chinese artists to study abroad in France, including Xu Beihong, Lin Fengmian, and Wu Dayu, all anchored their hope on external forces to initiate reforms and

innovations. This artistic enlightenment went on for some time during the New Culture Movement and the May Fourth Movement until it was interrupted by the war. Then came the emergence of artists who created works on the theme of resistance to war and salvation, such as Guan Shanyue and Jiang Zhaohe, and art thus became a matter of artistic sociology, and the path to enlightenment was subsequently broken off. A few years into the establishment of the new PRC, art was more often in the service of ideology. It was not until the 1980s that we returned to the essence of art and its true value. This period happened to be when Mr. Yu graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts. As Qiu Zhenzhong inscribed: "The dwellings are an unadorned culture, but it can be easily destroyed. The dwellings culture of any ethnic group can be changed beyond recognition as modern lifestyles permeate, as anthropologists have constantly warned us. Yu Chunming's work on dwellings is not only his enterprise; he has preserved a valuable factual record of observing and understanding the dwellings culture of our time. ... The rigorous overlap of brushstrokes makes it seem as if one is confronted with a world that is bygone, mysterious, yet ready to be entered anytime. No artist has yet treated the dwellings in this way."[4] At that time, Yu Chunming determinedly walked towards nature, towards dwellings, he broke through all kinds of life choices and struggles he had faced in life through his journey of landscape paintings, and reached self-perception, which took him out of his home, out of Jiangxi, and out of the country. It was a process that was of a legendary tone and research value.

Combining the two traces of East and West, whether the Italian Metaphysical School of Painting and the Ruins Art or the early American landscape painting and the Chinese landscape painting themes, has become a historical foundation for Yu Chunming's art paintings. At the intersection of Eastern and Western art history, Mr. Yu has always been concerned with the natural environment in which he exists and the art of inhabitancy in his surroundings, forming a very clear sense of the issues and a clear historical trajectory. His works give prominence to the specificality of the times and highlight a thematic landscape forgotten by many. As he said during his lecture, "I am particularly interested in the remains of historical vicissitudes and often feel elements of peacefulness in the study of Matisse."[5] He returned to the countryside, in the West of China, where he was brought up, to find the language and symbols for everyday use of his own. However, the most valuable thing is that he eventually left China and came to the United States, which is at the forefront of world art. Each region has its cultural heritage and traditions, the East and the West, the South and the North formed different characteristics due to different climates, geographical environments, and humanistic traditions, which are conventions of one's culture. Eastern culture has many humanistic traditions and is sometimes a confined "Family Culture," an important characteristic of Chinese regional culture. Yu Chunming has done a comprehensive theoretical analysis and classification of this unique characteristic; his work is a comprehensive

understanding of it. Indeed, the family culture of the East has a well-established cultural system that maintains the rituals and visuals of the race. The architecture and dwellings of the East have a distant historical memory of everyday life, which is unique among the cultures of the various peoples of the world. Therefore, according to Yu Chunming, "Chinese culture does not emphasize people or even people are not included, so there's no way that we can paint people as well as artists in European countries such as the United States; however, the unique cultural symbols represented by family culture are embedded in Chinese culture, so I will paint Chinese dwellings, which is the exact representation of the family culture."[6] Decades into one day, Yu Chunming has seen dwellings as a representation of Chinese culture, especially a culture from ancient times. This is called the "Ruins" Art in the West, an art of ancient ruins formed by the family culture. Yu Chunming deems their uniformity at some level. However, with globalization, every regional culture will eventually come to the world stage. We can see this reality from the current conditions of historical ruins all around the world. Thus, it is a completely different time from what it used to be; whether it is the family structure or the paternalism of the East, there's still a phenomenon of reversion now. However, no matter how outdated or ordinary the Chinese dwellings may be, this is a particularly important feature of Eastern culture, and there is no way to judge whether it's right or wrong in aesthetics and history, as this is the cultural context in which the Oriental people have lived for thousands of years. In art history, it could be argued that this is "Ruins Art." However, this is the core of family culture in China, and its cultural identity will be reflected in all aspects of contemporary culture as time progresses.

So, as he told me: "The first time I saw Kiefer's work, it resonated strongly with me, and this is what I wanted to express." The painter Yu Chunming makes extensive use of color, light and shadow, and perspective in realistic painting, not to reproduce the object, but to express the emotions of metaphysical and spiritual paintings through Chinese regional ruins.

2. The Unique Graphic System of Spiritual Landscape Painting

In the history of Eastern and Western art, all great painters have had their unique graphic language. This process of accumulation and evolution can also be seen in the three historical stages of the formation of Yu Chunming's paintings. In his early years, he traveled far and wide and sketched all over the country, which was the initial stage of his graphic creations, painting real landscapes, like photorealism, a stage of accumulating materials. We can see the importance of this accumulation in a large number of Mr. Yu's sketching works from his early years when he abandoned photographic means in favour of a large number of sketches to accumulate materials. We know that sketches that combine one's mind with action can not only record the natural landscapes of the outside world but also allow for an artistic sublimation in the artist's mind. According to Zheng Banqiao's process of "bamboo in the eyes" and "bamboo in the chest" to

"bamboo in the hands," Mr. Yu completed an important transformation in his artistic creation through the process of "dwelling in the eyes" to "dwelling in the chest" to "dwelling in the hands." His sketch works are intimate and touching, with a vivid live quality as well as emotional quality, which differentiates them from the style of the camera.

The second phase of Yu Chunming's work combines his language with the styles of paintings of masters in history, encompassing classic Chinese Shan Shui landscapes and Western landscape materials, combining current creations with the traces of art history and reality, thus elevating sketches and realism paintings to the level of art, and finally forming his unique style of painting and art language. While in virtue of the language of Chinese Shan Shui paintings and Western spiritual landscape landscapes as well as Ruins Art, Mr. Yu Chunming also drew on the language system of Western modern paintings. His works have combined with Western art, including the most avant-garde of American art. Using the modern Western sense of composition and color-blocking, we can get a glimpse of the senses of Fan Kuan, Shi Tao, Brueghel and Rembrandt from his paintings; moreover, the modernity of Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso, Morandi, Marguerite, and Rousseau, as well as the senses of contemporary American early landscape paintings and avant-garde art. He has strung together the art languages of the Eastern and Western painting worlds and created his unique style of painting. Most importantly, the family culture that Yu Chunming depicts belongs to the unique cultural system under Chinese social values, where dwellings represent a symbol of the family culture; thus it's a unique artistic system that differentiates itself from Western cultural symbols.

He often uses traditional realistic styling methods, which share similarities with Western metaphysical paintings in multiple aspects, including linearity, space, perspective, structure, light, and shades, except that the subject of his depictions is the imaginary ruins art of the East. He is very interested in the historical and emotional nature of his subjects, a sense of personal experience in the relics of the past, combining the literariness with visuality through the muscular symbolism of the trees and streets in his images. Mr. Yu's portrayal of the remains of Chinese dwellings from the past is different from other ordinary still life paintings. It fills the picture with a sense of aesthetic historical imagery shaped by common (everyday) people and the Western spiritual art of landscape painting. This exploration is like a "gene" and is very important in the history of painting schools around the world. Later on, no matter how American art developed in a post-modern direction, the gene of spiritual landscape painting was always present; that is, the creation of landscapes and themes of man and nature has never stopped. Although we live in cities made of steel and concrete, traditional Eastern culture is invisibly integrated into our subconsciousness. He believes that coming overseas is more than just moving his studio to the United States; he wants to bring the genes of Chinese culture to America and combine them with

the local culture.

Having heard Yu Chunming's lectures on Chinese dwellings, it was clear to me that he had conducted in-depth studies and iconology examinations of the various ethnicities and dwellings around China, and that these materials were also of historical value to the study of Chinese architectural history. Most importantly, he did not only focus on architecture itself: the historical gene of spiritual landscape painting combined with the metaphysical school of painting and Ruin Art provides clues and roots in Western art history for developing Yu Chunming's art. He uses the dwellings as symbols to speak about Chinese culture, and this cultural accumulation has long been integrated into his mind.

Most importantly, Yu Chunming draws on the aesthetical theories of Schopenhauer and Nietzschean, who argued that "the only way to have innovative, extraordinary, even immortal ideas is to be completely isolated from the world for some time, if the most unusual things can reveal their novelty and specialness, to show their true nature."[7] Through his paintings depicting dwellings that have been isolated for some time and even currently alienated, he shows a novelty in our contemporary urbanization process, which according to Schopenhauer's philosophy is the essence of his artistic thought in painting. The creation of an oil painting medium is universal, but each region has its distinctive cultural symbols and theoretical system. I want to use the term "representative of Eastern Ruin Art" to position Yu Chunming's uniqueness as the traditional creation of oil paintings. His work is mainly based on the departed dwellings, but not limited to them, the positioning would be more appropriate with this kind of broad vision. Because every artist is fond of illustrating one's thoughts and ideas through the theme that one is most interested in, such as Qi Baishi painting shrimps or Xu Beihong painting horses, we cannot simply define any master in art history as a painter of a single painting category. After two transformations of Mr. Yu's "Chineseness, de-Chineseness," he is ushering in new transformations and artistic ideology collisions. As Li Keran said, "Use the greatest force to fight the way in, then use the greatest force to fight the way out." It is within our anticipation that his experience and perspective will be even more exciting in his future artistic creation.

3. Oriental Aesthetics: The Picturization of Poetry and the poeticization of Images

Yu Chunming believes that literature is an important factor in painting. Although he emphasizes modern visual language in his pictures, he does not exclude literary language, and his works subconsciously penetrate a poetic meaning through his personalized language. Each of Yu Chunming's paintings is a poem, and when I see his painting *Spring Glory*, I naturally think of the poetic meanings of: "Spring grass grows in the pond, willows in the garden change into songbirds. Sad to think of the Bin poem 'Out of the Chariot', even more emotional to think of the Chu song 'Spring Grasses Growing and Luxuriant.'" [8](Xie Lingyun's *Climbing up the Pond*).

When I saw a group of his sketches, I thought of the realm in the poem of Wan Qiyong of the Song Dynasty: "The short and long pavilion, the ancient and modern emotions, the cool toad outside the building is a measure of life. The autumn is clearer after the rain. The clouds are flat in the evening, and the mountains are crossed in the evening, the sound of autumn leaves and geese is not to be heard by pedestrians."[9] Seeing some of his works in *The Bronze Years* reminded me of Dong Qichang's poem, "Stream clouds over the rain add to the mountain's greenery, flower pieces stick to the sand for the fragrance of water." Seeing some of his cold-colored works in the hall inside, I also thought of the poem of Wang Wei in the Tang Dynasty: "A little rain in the lightly shaded pavilion, I was too lazy to open the courtyard door. Sitting down and watching the moss, the lovely green color is almost dyed to people's clothes."[11] Mr. Yu has achieved the picturization of poetry and the poeticization of images. When I saw the *Frozen Sail* series, I thought of Du Fu's poems, such as "A stone spring flows from a dark wall, grass dew drips from an autumn root" and "In an empty village, only birds are seen, people do not meet the sunset, the wind blows on the face of the ravine, and the pine dew drips from the body."[12] It is worth mentioning that Yu Chunming's paintings are the initiator of using the medium of oil painting to express the aesthetics of oriental poetry's desolate cold imagery, and he has bridged the highly organic unity of Chinese and Western aesthetic concepts to achieve a seamless and perfect combination.

I grew up in the rural areas located on the border of Shaanxi and Gansu Province, the living environment at that time was the exact architectural style portrayed in Mr. Yu's art. And as it is, I grew up in the courtyard of such dwellings in Mr. Yu's paintings. At that time, these buildings were surrounded by mountains and water, and the fragrance of the wooden structures fused with the fragrance of the earth left a deep impression on us, especially the life in the kiln at that time was a vivid nostalgia, and the lights and shadows of the paintings made me recall the memories of sunrise and sunset on the plateau or my mother lighting the oil lamp. Mr. Yu's full of emotional brush strokes give us a reproduction of an oriental residential environment such as tulou, hammocks, bamboo buildings, compounds, kilns, and other characteristic regional landscapes. First of all, the regional landscape itself is a kind of artificial transformation of unnaturalized man-made forms of art design works. Mr. Yu's keen metaphysical aesthetic vision found these desolate, cold aesthetic properties. Moreover, he blends natural beauty and artistic beauty, realizing a modern linguistic transformation of Chinese Ruin Art in his art world. At this moment, as overseas travelers, especially those who have lived through these experiences, I believe that when they encounter these paintings in a globalized context, like in the United States, I believe that everyone can't help but feel a kindred emotion. His work *Chimney Smoke* seems to be brought into some kind of timely memory, into the nostalgia of childhood. In the painting, one may find

some scenes from the past: from time to time, a picture of childhood will emerge in front of the village at the entrance of the house, and the smoke curling up from the roof will remind us of our mother's figure cooking or yelling to the children to come home.

When we look at Mr. Yu's paintings, we find many lines that match those of classic poems. I think the painter does not create according to the context of certain poets, mainly because the painter has a poetic way of thinking about images, which is the key to creation. The frames that Yu Chunming selected, a landscape, a few trees or mountains and waters is already a pictorial presentation of a poetic way of thinking. However, the way of presenting words and images under the same artistic concept is very different, just like Dunhuang frescoes presenting Buddhism inside, but the images have a completely different system composition from Buddhist scriptures. Mr. Yu's paintings often use "exaggeration" "repetition" "deformation" and other formal language transformations to achieve poetic expression. In ancient and modern times, very few painters can paint the poetic meaning of the desolate cold. I would like to use a poem by Qin Guan to convey the overall touch I got: "Because it was severe autumn, the podocarpus trees in the courtyard had begun to wither, and the flowers and plants in the courtyard were evenly sprinkled with a layer of white frost. On the gorgeous pavilion, we sat close together. The host poured wine frequently, leaving no cup empty. Outside, the autumn wind blew the embroidered curtains creaking, but the room was still filled with a pleasant fragrance. With her long and slender fingers, she slowly played the Guzheng decorated with white silver. When she was tired of playing and her hands were cold, she rested on the stove for a little while. Although it was autumn and everything was dying, her face still seemed to have the color of spring, red and gorgeous, which was the flush of wine." [13]Mr. Yu's painting art is a poem without words, and these images combine his travels and reading of books.

Yu Chunming used his personal experience to elaborate on the uniqueness of this regional culture, for example, he felt a particularly strong native culture when he traveled to Mexico, reinforcing his emphasis on the cultural differences in his works. In fact, whether it is Indian culture, Mayan culture, or the formation of China's regional residential culture, it is mainly caused by the closedness. The regional culture is not concerned with the progress and fashion of the outside world until it has gone through the process of culture globalization, just like the differences between Bauhaus architecture and residential architecture, the set of culture developed independently by the regional culture is permeated with the power of craftsmanship for thousands of years. Yu Chunming's paintings of residential houses do not emphasize going back to the past, but rather finding a cultural spirituality and poetry in these houses, and his peculiarity lies in the fact that he came out from China and then persisted abroad to experience the metaphysical spirituality formed by the accumulation of this home culture, and expressed it

in the form of visual works. The poems describing this culture in Chinese poetry are historically significant sequences, for example, Bai Juyi wrote in *Thinking of Home on the Winter Solstice in Handan*: "On the winter solstice in the Handan post, I hug my knees in front of the lamp and the shadow accompanies me. When I think of sitting at home late at night, I should still talk about people who have traveled far away."[14] For example, Wang Wei's well-known poem *Remembering My Brothers in Shandong on the Ninth Day of the Ninth Month*: "Being alone in a foreign place, I miss my relatives more than ever on festive occasions. When I think of the place where my brothers are climbing today, I will think of the one person missing when I plant cornelian everywhere."[15] and so on. Family culture is not only reflected in the literary history of the written word, but also in the visual art of fine art. The symbol system formed by Chinese family culture is a unique cultural Chinese-ness, and this cultural specificity is needed in the world culture. This characteristic is forever objective, whether in the past or the future.

In conclusion, the art of Mr. Yu is a special case of regional and cultural differentiation in the contemporary globalized art process, the metaphysical art concept and the pictorial meaning of Eastern Ruin Art are the unique characteristics of his paintings. This case of Asian American art identity and imagery may be overlooked by Western art history in the current context of contemporary American art. It may also be forgotten by Chinese contemporary art history, which advocates following Western ideas. Still, the place of Yu Chunming's art in the threads of Chinese and Western art history is unquestionable. Just like Zao Wou-ki, Chu Teh-chun and other overseas artists, Yu's artistic journey of "Chinese-ness and de-Chinese-ness" is a very interesting subject. Art history should break out of the paradigm of monolithic and postmodern contexts, and art theory should also focus on iconographic oriental clues. We need to return to the focus on the "art world" or "art atmosphere" advocated by Arthur Danto, just as contemporary researchers of Ruin Art believe that "art does not save ruins, but it can start life." In particular, the creative concept of Eastern Ruin Art that Yu Chunming is currently practicing must not be ignored, and we should not forget the specificity of Asian artists in the American context, nor should we forget Yu Chunming.

Editor: Li Congcong

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