

HONG KONG

Xu Jianguo
at Alisan Fine Arts

Time and place change always in subtle and dynamic ways, shifting shapes, in season and out. For a painter, to explore and to capture nature's myriad changes is the work of a lifetime, something Chinese *shanshui* artists know well. The great English painters J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851) and John Constable (1776–1837) also understood this reality: Turner, through his stunning watercolors; and Constable, through his obsession with clouds, forms he knew would never be same, a truly exceptional happening in nature, like waves that will never repeat.

It is not only in the wild of the natural world that time and place yield to catastrophes, reshaping entire environments forever, but also in the burgeoning urban sprawls where well-established ecosystems have been transformed beyond recognition. While skyscrapers have replaced mountains, wild woods and chaotic meadows have been exchanged for well-ordered parks; traditional architectural forms have been consumed by glass-and-steel modernity. Each alteration throws up new physical and aesthetic challenges through which to project a new world, one in which the past and the present are uniquely entwined, informed by a new visual poetry.

The Chinese painter Xu Jianguo (b.1951, Shanghai) seeks to instill a deep poetic quality in his art, one derived from his long research into Chinese painting and its history, and one that is also informed by his residences abroad and his wide-ranging

travels. It is no accident then that *Poetic Cityscapes* is the title of his exhibition. The cities in this show include Shanghai, Paris, Hong Kong, Berlin, New York, Budapest, amongst others: each is a place rich in history, culture, and distinctive architectural character that speaks to poetry and romance, as well as unique cultural heritages, so that no single place is not without connection to another: no city is isolated in Xu's world.

Xu's generous flowing Chinese line and tight Western

architectural geometry combine to make unique views that remind me of sepia-toned travel posters or post-cards of another time. This is one of Xu's strengths here: he combines two cultures and their visual aesthetics to speak to similarity and difference at the same time. Even his lovely rousing ink-on-silk landscape-and-cloud painting entitled *Heavenly Clouds* (2016) does not escape his cultural clash.

What is interesting about many of Xu's ink-on-silk city works is that although

relatively small he manages with great skill to lend a feeling of grace and monumentality to them. For some people there may be a sense of sameness about some scenes and places, but this, especially with the European cities, rests with long-shared historical, religious, and cultural relations.

Of the European cities I liked Xu's handling of Postdam, Berlin, London, and Prague, in which his buildings are enhanced in place by his subtle ink line, which helps each scene to breathe in a different way.

Xu's scenes of Hong Kong and Shanghai speak to colonial historical realities as much as they do to the unique visual, architectural, and commercial cultures that emerged in these cities. Such works of East and West stand as moments in time that one can long savor in one's imagination long after one has left their presence.

Xu's timeless quality is found in a good number of his works. *Boat Race in Venice* (2015), for example, reminds me of historic paintings of boats 'parading' on the Thames during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1533–1603); while *The Land of Peach Blossoms* (2018) speaks to the long history of Chinese landscape painting in which the reality of subjective poetry is deeply rooted.

Ian Findlay

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Yes and Now at
Art Experience Gallery

There are few galleries or foundations in Hong Kong who pay much attention to emerging artists not long out of art school. Art Experience Foundation is one



Xu Jianguo,
**New York
Central Park**,
2017, Chinese ink
and color on silk,
diametre 38 cm. All
images: Courtesy of
the Artist and Alisan
Fine Arts.



Xu Jianguo,
**Boat Race in
Venice**,
2015, Chinese ink
on silk,
38 x 35.5 cm.



Xu Jianguo, **Bird's Eye View of Hong Kong**, 2011–2014, Chinese ink on silk, painting 42.5 x 144 cm; preface 41 x 100 cm.