

# Witching hour

Shanghai-based artist Yang Fudong's latest video installation captures the dreamlike quality of midnight, writes **Doretta Lau**

On an unseasonably hot December morning, a group of journalists, art historians and curators gather on the terrace of an industrial building in Wong Chuk Hang for the pre-opening of Yang Fudong's exhibition at Spring Workshop. The work, on show until January 8, is *The Fifth Night* (2010), a black-and-white seven-screen video installation that is part of Videotage's "One World Exposition", a project showcasing Chinese media art across different venues in Hong Kong.

*The Fifth Night* is set in a Shanghai of the distant past. It's midnight, and a group of attractive young people move through the city streets at a somnambulistic pace. On each screen a scene plays out in a single long take, a departure from Yang's other work where edits push the viewer to consider the image as a still or a painting. Part-way through the film, music composed by Jin Wang – one of Yang's frequent collaborators – starts playing, creating an illusion that emotion is building.

Yang, a Shanghai-based artist of international renown, addresses the pre-opening crowd in a soft voice in Putonghua: "I had the idea for this project one or two years before I began shooting," he says. "I wanted to do something about midnight, and about loneliness. So this project can be seen as a very long painting."

Later, during an interview, he elaborates further on the idea of loneliness as a subject of the film: "The work captures a psychological state of mind. Midnight has a dreamlike quality about it that is very different from reality ... the people in the film keep to themselves."

He shoots in black and white because he believes it creates a sense of distance. "*The Fifth Night* is a movie about space within an art exhibition space," Yang says. "Originally I wanted to shoot on nine machines, but there were budget constraints." Rehearsals took two days, and shooting took place at the end of the second day, from 10pm until 6am the next day.

The installation is also an exploration of film language. "In *The Fifth Night*, the viewer becomes a second director because it is physically impossible to look at all seven screens at the same time. So you can only focus on maybe one screen, so in your peripheral vision you take in what's coming from the other screens ... There is this impact of seeing things in real time because they are shot at the same moment from different angles."

Yang, born in 1971 in Beijing, wanted to be an artist since primary school, and the circumstances were



in his favour. "My father was in the army, so I had a certain living environment at the time. The secondary school I attended was attached to Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts. So after I graduated, I naturally applied to the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts."

Part-way through his degree the school, located in Hangzhou, renamed itself China Academy of Fine Arts. In 1995, Yang graduated with a degree in oil painting, but had begun experimenting with film and photography.

"I believe every road will lead to



The viewer becomes a second director because it is physically impossible to look at all seven screens at the same time

YANG FUDONG, ARTIST

Rome eventually, so it's just about using different means in the process. So I chose film and videos as the means for myself," he says, explaining his move away from oil painting.

"If you look at film productions in the 1920s in China, although it was so long ago it really represented the modern world at the time," he says when asked about his interest in cinema of that period and its influence on his work. "I saw many black-and-white films when I was attending university."

Yang rose to international

attention in 2002 at Documenta, an art exhibition that takes place every five years in Kassel, Germany, with his first 35mm black-and-white film *An Estranged Paradise* (1997-2002). The Documenta 11 short guide describes the work as "a meditation on peace, boredom, love and melancholy". It is now in the collection of New York's Museum of Modern Art, along with a digital print *Ms Huang at M. Last Night* (for the book *Parkett No. 76*), a 2006 work.

In 2003, he began shooting the first part of *Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest*, a non-narrative five-part film that runs close to four hours. The final instalment was completed in 2007, and the entire sequence was shown at the Venice Biennale, thus cementing his international reputation. A collector has promised the work as a gift to the Asia Society's Contemporary Art Collection.

One of Yang's early work is showing at Osage Gallery in Kwun Tong, also as part of the "One World Exposition". *Backyard – Hey! Sun is Rising* (2001) is a black-and-white single channel video work that has an unsettling quality. Shots of men practising with weapons are intercut with views of Shanghai and of nature. The editing creates a frenetic way of seeing.

"That work is very important to me because it sort of decided my future direction, whether I was going to move towards film and video or other mediums," Yang says.

"When we think about films it's either an industrial product, or some people see it as a type of video art. I wanted to explore the possibility that maybe I could make other creations."

Next, he may continue working on a project called the "Library Film Plan".

"After I shot *The Seven Intellectuals*, I decided I wanted to create 22 films in the coming 20 years. Whether they would be long ones or short ones or experimental ones or artistic ones, I don't know. But they would be like a bunch of books placed on a bookshelf. As a collection, they would represent my thoughts and my ideas."

Yang hasn't ruled out making a feature film, although he's never shot from a screenplay before. He's thinking of committing his ideas to paper at some point prior to arriving on set for the shoot. "I would like to do that one day because I'm driving everyone crazy."

thereview@scmp.com

*Spring Workshop, 3/F Remex Centre, 42 Wong Chuk Hang Road, Hong Kong. Wed-Sun, 12pm-8pm; Dec 31, 12pm-4pm; today, closed*