

PRESSBOOK

NI Youyu

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## NI YOUYU

SO NEAR YET SO FAR



In planetary terms, the world we inhabit is but a minuscule speck. But that doesn't stop Ni Youyu from affirming humanity's centrality in the universe through his creations, as showcased in his solo exhibition at Perrotin, Hong Kong. While some works cast our attempts at controlling principles of nature as futile, the show lent a touching significance to human experience and endeavor.

In *Dust (Fog I)* and *(Fog II)* (both 2017), we see the breakdown of a boundless subject matter into manageable, numerical units for easier human consumption. Ni imposes grids over black-and-white clusters of stars and nebulae, depicted with near-photorealist accuracy, disrupting the sightlines of viewers who might otherwise be swallowed by the starry expanses. Further accentuating the human handiwork were the smaller printed images next to *Fog I* and *II*—complete with the artist's hand-scribbled notes and grids penciled over—of which the paintings are magnified replicas.

Nature is similarly boxed into *Relic* (2018), a mixed-media, six-meter-wide triptych of a forest blanketed by snow. The canvas is textured in sections to mimic tree bark, lending a three-dimensionality to the work, as if the composition is breaking free from its confines. The black-and-white palette suggests charred wood and ash, leading one to ask exactly what these trees are a relic of. This work is a continuation of a 2017 painting of the same name tucked away in another room of the gallery, in which a landscape of trees and rocks resides improbably within what appears to be a glass terrarium. If the earlier work is a study of our fastidious preoccupation with controlling space, the latter seems to be the next logical step, expressing the continued survival of nature long after we return to dust.

Again examining humanity's obsession with breaking down aspects of life into fixed units is *Inches of Time* (2012–13), an installation with nine handmade rulers, each utilizing different standards of measurement—a play on the Chinese proverb, “an inch of time is an inch of gold.” The rulers appear to follow the standard millimeter and centimeter format, but the notches are in fact mathematically inaccurate, made by the artist from instinct. Some rulers include units written alphanumerically, while others have numbers written in Chinese characters; one even has a series of astrological signs carved into the wood. A small screen mounted on the wall plays a four-minute video revealing the laborious process Ni undertakes to craft his rulers—a futile activity, as they are unviable for their prescribed purpose, their measurements marred by human subjectivity and arbitrariness.

Yet Ni never completely descends to fatalism, imbuing human endeavor with a sense of wonder. In *Pagoda No. 8* (2017), presented in the same room as *Inches of Time*, wooden lotus seats from sculptures in the artist's personal collection are assembled into an intricate tower—a product not only of its material components, but of the time invested to amass the objects from temples in Japan and China and painstakingly piece them together. Surrounded by the nonfunctional rulers, the wooden *Pagoda* seems to assert the primacy of human ingenuity, which, unlike productivity, cannot be bounded by arbitrary temporal limits.

In *The Endless Second No. 15* (2018), an installation in which a black rock is transformed into a thing of alien beauty, human perspective is again presented as a source of awe. The rock's dark, textured surface recalls primordial volcanic igneous formations, the eruptive, untamable process by which they are born subverted by the fussy, civilized presentation of the specimen on a small plinth, within a glass case mounted on the wall. Next to the case are two blown-up photographs, each a meter-and-a-half wide, featuring extreme close-ups of the rock's surface that appear as unexplored terrain on a mysterious foreign planet.

Ni's approach is microscopic, delving deeper until any given entity—physical or conceptual—is broken down into its basic elements. Space, time, ecosystems and objects all come under the artist's scrutiny, reproduced in works that reveal a cosmology with humanity at its center, illustrating the magic of life seen through a tiny human lens. After all, an insignificant fly's vision still offers kaleidoscopic detail.

OPHELIA LAI

#### Opposite page

#### ZHANG YUE

Installation view of “If I Could” at Gallery Yang, Beijing, 2018.  
Courtesy Gallery Yang.

#### This page

#### NI YOUYU

*Relic (detail)*

2018

Mixed media on canvas, 220 x 600 cm.  
Courtesy the artist and Perrotin, Hong Kong/  
Seoul/Tokyo/Shanghai/Paris/New York.