



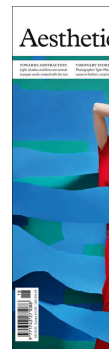
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A Sense of Disruption: In Conversation with Yan Wang Preston



Yan Wang Preston (b. 1976) is an award-winning artist interested in identity, landscapes, migration and the environment. Her major art projects include *Mother River* (2017), a photographic odyssey documenting the entire length of the Yangtze, as well as *Forest* (2010-2017), a photographic project that investigated the politics of recreating forests and "natural" environments in new Chinese cities. Preston started the project in Chongqing by following the developments of the old transplanted trees, noticing their status change, becoming "trophies, decorations and a commodity to raise property prices with." This same project won First Prize in the Professional Landscape Category at the Sony World Photography Awards in 2019. The artist's practice is meticulous, and exhaustive, with a particular focus on performance and documentary work. This month, the artist's highly anticipated solo exhibition *Three Easier Pieces* opens at Messums London. The show includes the restaging of canonical artworks by Caspar David Friedrich and Édouard



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Manet, reshaping the pieces as a way of pictorial reclaim. In this interview, we speak to Preston on what informs her practice, discussing topics of representation, vulnerability and participatory art.

A: How would you define your practice as an artist?

YWP: Photography is my primary media. However, my photography is increasingly intercultural and performative, with time and research as two important aspects. As such, my work employs participation, collaboration, and teamwork, with moving image, sound, installation and the book in various formats as part of the outputs.

A: You originally trained as a doctor. Do you find any intersections between medicine and creativity?

YWP: Perhaps, there is the 'clinical' need to consider things rationally from multiple aspects that underlines my thinking as a medical doctor and an artist. In recent years, I have started using artistic processes inspired by medicine, for example, dissecting, incision, and suture stitches. Modern and western medicine is a fundamental part of western science, which is a different philosophical system from, say Chinese traditional medicine. I'm very interested in a critical examination of these philosophies. But it's a big subject and I'll take my time.

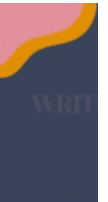
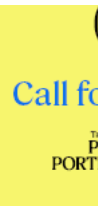


A: *Three Easier Pieces* restages canonical western artworks by artists such as Caspar David Friedrich and Manet. Why did you decide to recreate these specific pieces?

I developed the overall series "organically." I made the first piece, then I waited to see where it would lead me to. So, I made *After 'To Add a Metre to an Anonymous Mountain, 1995'* at first back in 2021, as a test. The learning from this piece, mainly in the vulnerability and power of the naked body, inspired me to look further. My work has always explored the politics of the landscape; therefore, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* became the next choice for its problematic iconisation of (western) (hu)man. Interests in the nude can't be separated from interests in gender issues, so I chose *Olympia* as the third piece. Of course, it's quite scary to even think about tackling these iconic works, since so much has been done about them. So I made sure that I did as much research as possible and gave them all I could — time, money, effort, and my own body.

A: There's a real feeling of play and tongue and cheek narrative in *Three Easier Pieces*. There's also this sense of, oh yes, these photographs now represent the world around us. What inspired the title?

Good question. I'm actually inspired by Marina Abramovic's *Seven Easy Pieces* (2005) which, among other things, made me realise that originality may not be the only source of authority in art. In her seven pieces, Marina still had one of her own — *The Artist is Present*. So I thought that I'd do something even easier — I'd make no "original" works, only re-stages and appropriations. Of course, there has been nothing easy about



it. Each one requires so much research, preparation, and investment. On average, one piece takes about a year to make. Since they're so hard but there is no 'original', *Three Easier Pieces* feels like a suitable title. Ha!

MAKING INTRODUCTIONS: Yan Wang Preston



A: After 'To Add a Metre to an Anonymous Mountain, 1995' (2021) reinvents Zhang Huan's original image. Can you discuss the significance of creating the work today, in a 21st century British context?

YWP: Well, first of all, the original piece is credited not only to Zhang Huan, but also to the other 11 artists involved in the making (10 in the pile – eight men, two women, one photographer, and one co-ordinator). The original work was created as a solidarity protest against the societal expulsion that they suffered in 1990s China where avant-garde artists were not understood or welcomed. Yet the form of their protest, to pile their bodies on top of each other, appeared to be so spontaneous, humane, even surreal. I always loved it. I chose to re-stage it with the full awareness of the ever-present societal division between genders, ages, and ethnicities. Is there a way to integrate, not divide, peoples and cultures? So people from diverse backgrounds were purposely invited, who, in a small way, reflected the demographics of contemporary Britain. Within the 10 people in my piece, there are five men, five women, with ages ranging from 29 to 69 years old. They all have different jobs / no jobs, sexualities, and they come from different parts of the world. Some were locally born, of course. One is from Italy, one is English-Japanese, quite a few have travelled the world before settling down in West Yorkshire. And there was me of course, from China. There were mostly strangers to each other but they all understood why I wanted to do the work: to send another solidarity message against the societal divisions in Britain. On top of that, we also subtly subverted the often-unsaid hierarchy in which western art and culture are seen as superior. Here we're "copying" a Chinese art. The work becomes a celebration of Britain's multi-ethnic society – for me, that's its significance.

A: How is this exhibition a continuation or a departure from your previous works? It's really interesting to see these works as something incredibly physical and human-led, particularly when looking at more environmentally-centred works such as *Forest* (2010-2017) and *With Love. From an Invader.* (2020-2023).

Three Easier Pieces are the most mature work that I've made so far in which cross-cultural research and fluid methodologies are fully consolidated. I would say that it's a development from my previous work. Each project of mine has a different focus. But even the earliest works, such as *Yuan* (2011) and *Mother River* (2010-2014) were performative, endurance-based and set in critical landscapes. *Forest* was my most "documentary" project whilst *With Love. From an Invader.* was a botanical preparation for *Three Easier Pieces*.

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A: Could you talk about the role of community practice in your work, and perhaps how you shot *After 'To Add a Metre to an Anonymous Mountain, 1995'*?

YWP: "Community" is a complex word, I'd use "participatory" here. I always admire works that are truly participatory in their conceptual design. When done well, they are very powerful because they send a collective voice, not just the artist's. But to do this successfully requires a lot of critical thinking. In my participatory work, I want to offer a meaningful experience to my participants. Quality is the only key here, not quantity. We need to enrich each other's lives. *After 'To Add a Metre to an Anonymous Mountain, 1995'* was my first serious attempt at this. It's a very sensitive piece because of the close encounter involved. So I made sure that I sent the right messages out and found the right people. I wrote a letter to fully explain the work's intention as well as its discomfort and potential risks. I sent the letter to a few friends, they introduced others. I made sure to know them well before the shoot, for example, with many we went for a naked wild swim together. To gain their trust by offering my own vulnerability was the key, I suppose.

A: How do you think photography affects the way we see the world?

YWP: Photography is almost the world we see now. As pros, we have the responsibility to produce photography that makes ourselves a better person, and hopefully the world a better place. But the better here can simply be a profound sense of being and living. It doesn't have to be just cleaner or greener.



A: Which artists or artworks inspire you today?

YWP: Ahh ... there are too many. But generally speaking, I admire artists who don't take themselves too seriously but take their art extremely seriously.

A: What can we look forward to next?

YWP: Definitely more flesh. More fun with the body in some sort of needy ways. And perhaps more head scratching in the attempts to "place" the work. By the way, you can participate, too.

Yan Wang Preston: Three Easier Pieces | Until 25 May

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Words: Yan Wang Preston and Chloe Elliott

Image Credits:

Yan Wang Preston, After 'Olympia, 1863', 2023_Stage.

Yan Wang Preston, After 'To Add a Metre to an Anonymous Mountain, 1995', 2021.

Yan Wang Preston, Central Park, University City, Chongqing, China, 2011. From Forest series (2010-2017).

Yan Wang Preston, Yuan - A Red Hand Drawn Circle, 2011.

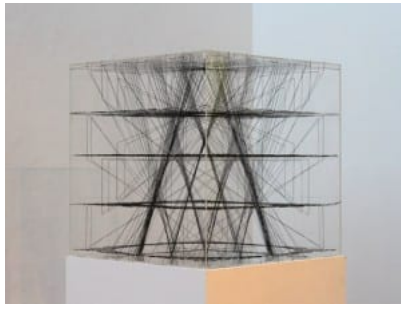
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YOUNG CREATIVE POLAND

Aesthetica speaks to Yan Wang Preston on representation, performance, landscape and the opening of her new exhibition at Messums London.

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