

Holzwege, ShanghART, Shanghai

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Robert Zhao Renhui

← *Trying to Remember a Tree*, 2014.

Photo : Alessandro Wang, courtesy of
ShanghART Gallery, Shanghai

↑ *Holzwege*, installation view, 2016.

Photo : Alessandro Wang, courtesy of
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Holzwege

Holzwege, the title for the inaugural exhibition of ShanghART's new gallery along Shanghai's West Bund, is taken from a book of six essays by Martin Heidegger, most recently translated into English as *Off the Beaten Track* (2002), which includes one of his most famous essays, "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1935–37). "Holzwege" denotes a path in the forest that only a woodsman would recognize, not one that has been cleared, but rather formed naturally. "Off the beaten track" suggests a journey taken by those skillful enough to see the path that lay before them, but perhaps the French translation of Heidegger's book (a title he purportedly endorsed) is equally instructive: *Chemins qui ne mènent nulle part* (1962), "paths that lead nowhere."

What would it mean to travel along a curatorial path with no assurance of destination, only to reach an impasse where the path no longer reveals itself? There is a beautiful refutation of the naturalness of forward progress, maybe closer to the heart of the kind of questioning Heidegger intended in the post-war return to his lectures on the notion of art than the exhibition's organizers realized. *Holzwege* offers a glimpse of Chinese artists and international artists (mostly German) as they travel an uncertain path that leads either to open fields or impassable briars.

One of the first and oldest works in the show is *Ich bring's uns wieder* (1981) by Jörg Immendorff. Immendorff, a student of Joseph Beuys, sets the tone with thick lines and unself-conscious painterly-ness that is as much Georg Baselitz in style as it is SpongeBob SquarePants in content. Next to Immendorff's work is a large painting by Zhang Enli, *Soilred and Bottlegreen* (2016), a wash in browns and greens, a seductive landscape in two dimensions. There are enough paintings in the exhibition to suggest that painting itself is a kind of connective tissue between these artists of different geographies and generations. Ding Yi's *Appearance of Crosses 2016-2*

(2016) and Robert Zhao Renhui's *Trying to Remember a Tree* (2014) use dots and grids in long beautiful patterns to suggest a third order of painting that doesn't abandon the medium but joins it with high-gloss and deeply satisfying technological panache. Liang Yue's *Treant* (2016) is the pinnacle of this painting-as-origin-story approach. *Treant* is a single-channel video of a scene from Yushan Island. The focus is on a huge tree, its roots thick and tangled, leaves blowing in a light breeze. The scene is so palliative, so perfect, that it takes a moment to notice that the composition of the image within the frame unmistakably signals the conventions of painting: *Treant* is a movement-image freed from its screen-ness by embracing the frame.

There are, of course, other movement-images, too. Chen Xiaoyun's *Chopping You Up Deadly* (2013) is a multi-channel video of a battle against an invisible foe that shows a man in blue shorts fight-dancing with a hatchet, illuminated by a lone spotlight against the dark countryside. Yang Zhenzhong's *If You Have a Parrot, What Words Would You Teach Him (Her)?* (2001) offers a different kind of movement: a television tube, some remote controls, a circuit board, and the intervention of the artist and assistants during the opening reception, desperate to calm a parrot who had clearly had enough of art for one evening.

Some follow the path, and others take flight.

Todd Meyers

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