

# ABOVE

mountains and seas

Exhibition by **HeMas Zhang**

Curator **Nicholas Tsoutas**

27 July – 18 Aug 2023

**REDBASE**  
contemporary art space





AMS-1 West

Mixed media—earth embers pebbles and shells on Canvas

152x122cm

2023



AMS-2 North

Mixed media—earth embers pebbles and shells on Canvas

152x122cm

2023



AMS-3 East

Mixed media—earth embers pebbles and shells on Canvas

152x122cm

2023



AMS-4 South

Mixed media—earth embers pebbles and shells on Canvas

152x122cm

2023



Video: Spring breeze blows again  
Blue Mountain  
59 seconds  
2023



Burned wood

152,129,126,111x23,24,25

Burnt wood, color earth, glue, protectant

2023



Burned wood

178,73,163,183x23,24,25

Burnt wood, color earth, glue, protectant

2023



# Signs of Life

ABOVE mountain and sea, by interdisciplinary artist, film maker, HeMas Zhang, is a meditative and spiritual engagement with the Australian landscape. HeMas Zhang explores the relationship between human beings and nature through the experience of the passage of time. This exhibition was developed during his residency at Sinofield, a Blue Mountains retreat, enabled him to directly feel and observe the profoundly ancient landscapes of the Blue Mountains whilst experiencing the unique environment through the lens of conversations with Buddhist monks. His different cultural perspective, provides us with a different understanding of the awareness of the old history of this land, as his abstraction rises above the land with a topographical almost spiritual connection that allows him to touch this land lightly. In doing so he asks us to examine our relationship with this environment and reflect upon what is it that we actually see? And how we see? And how we look? when we connect with this place , with this continent and with this history.

Zhang acknowledges his influence by the Classics of Mountains and Seas, also known as Shan Hai Jing, a Chinese classical text from approximately 4th century BCE, which systematically and comprehensively records mythical geographical overviews of the Qin dynasty, whilst providing future generations with information of the ecological environments, including mountains waterways, mineral, animal and plant distribution, recording climate changes, migration and information of ecological environments and human activities thousands of years ago. This eclectic work also contains crucial accounts of rites of sacrifice along with omens of overt catastrophic events, in a classically spectacular guided tour of the known worlds of antiquity, whilst moving outwards from the famous mountains of central China to the lands beyond the seas. The writers display a conscious awareness of an outside, a space beyond the known, an unknown world that exists outside the borders of knowledge, of geography, and indeed the borders of consciousness itself. This awareness, is significant insofar that it is crucial for exploring the unknown beyond the limits of the known world, both spiritually and physically in a quest to exceed and expand on what is possible beyond the comprehension of knowing. To the curious mind, the known will always be insufficient and incomplete in it and of itself.

Not unlike the mythical traveller in Shan Hai Jing, HeMas Zhang's journey is one of contemporary enlightenment, and one of the awe of wonderment with the "discovery" of new and perspectives and new endless possibilities, that expand his own horizon, whilst what he witnesses exceeds what is already known. This is a new revelation for him, and from the perspective of the retreat in the Blue Mountains, a spiritual place closer to heaven, he observes the vastness Australia, that place beyond the seas possibly referred to in Shan Hai Jing. This change of perspective allows him to reimagine the earth beyond his previous limits and the limitations of knowledge. For Zhang, this is like a renewal of himself and his being and represents a spiritual growth not only of knowledge that he desires to nourish his understanding of himself in relation to the world, but also how to represent the world, critically and spiritually. His wonderment is not just in seeing or witnessing something new, or something as literal as a new mountain for the first time, but it is his understanding what the experience of the new means implicitly to him, and how he make sense of this expanded knowledge both physically and spiritually as well as how he can creatively and aesthetically harness its potential. For Zhang, it is here that the Classic of Mountains and Seas functions through time and travels through history as it gives significance to how we now only imagine the world beyond the existing

borders of what is already known, but our encounter with the unknown allows us to re-encounter what we once knew through the possibilities of what we now know. This is a story of desire for the unknown, and in this case the beyond, which also suggests the above, the above between our physical reality and heaven. The above is also a reference to transcendence into the imagined or the metaphysical reality of being.

For Zhang, his art, like the Classic of Mountains and Seas, is about a knowledge that travels through history, that is sensitive to the traces of life, and pays close attention to the consequences of humanity and the dialogues of history and human destiny and salvation. In his topographical reflections, Zhang almost philosophically creates an art that almost minimally interferes with the environment by utilizing materials such as earth, ash embers and tiny pebbles, to create his almost monochrome abstract paintings of his experience with the land. HeMas Zhang also recycles burnt tree limbs from the Blue Mountain bushfires, recreating them as sculptures that seemingly stand as both a testament to time and a refusal to succumb to the destructive intensity of the bushfire heat. His drone video slowly circling a forest of trees is a profound statement of the beauty of this land and its survival through the passage of time. Projecting the video on a bed of salt acknowledges the deep history of the Blue Mountains which millions of years ago existed below sea level. This, in itself for Zhang is the perfect synergy of time, in a sense of regional locality, that connects mountains to the sea in a profoundly holistic and interdependent Buddhist relationship that suggests for him a deep love and care of this place, and allows him to create a meditative installation of quiet respect for this ancient land. HeMas Zhang encounters with the Australian landscape is not dissimilar insofar as a migrant he encounters every moment with new possibilities with difference and with a sense of awe that reexamines his own relationship with place and environment.

For HeMas Zhang, is stimulated by his own curiosity of place, and in acknowledging its difference he pays close attention to the details of place, to its material particularities that signify its difference. The abstraction that he responds with is reductive as he focuses on, a minimalistic approach that is not representational, but instead a meditation of place through time and as a conversation with its history. He explores a strategy that encourages a close examination of place, a closer scrutiny with and of this land, by engaging it directly through the materiality of place. His “material paintings” reject an art that responds to the narratives of representation, and resists a stylistic conformity to the gestural approaches of abstract expressionist forms, but instead he chooses a more speculative and a more conceptual attitude in a minimalist, almost monochromatic rendering of place. This minimalistic approach shifts from the more landscape representation of nature and land to a more specific, more detailed focus, almost microscopic engagement with place that suggests a different way of thinking about art, along with a different context of engagement. HeMas Zhang is not satisfied with simply reproducing the reality of appearances, but prefers to meditate on his explorations on the meaning of the real rather than its representational illusion in painting. HeMas Zhangs paintings collapses all spatial perspectives in his understanding of landscape, instead adopting a strategy of intense color saturation as a form that critically and aesthetically undermines the conventions of landscape painting. The paintings however are layered or grounded with a certain textured tactility, of burnt embers and tiny grains of earth or pebbles, all specific to the geographic locality of the Blue Mountains, providing them with a sensory and bodily experience of place itself, and of lived encounters with the history of place. The materials are of vital importance to the production of his work as they suggest a direct symbiotic relationship to that place where he both encountered and collected them. Zhang is looking at this

land deeply, almost spiritually in a meditative encounter with place, nature and environment. The ochre color of the earth matters to him as does the granular pebbles and the black ash, for it is the very earth that informs his paintings and brings them into existence.

HeMas Zhang sculptures stand erect, almost anthropomorphically, like human figures engaged in a performative ritual celebrating their own existence and survival. The burnt trunks function as evidence, not only of the place ravaged by fire, where bushfire represents a catastrophic event but more significantly, of the possibility of renewal after the fire passes, and the resilience of nature. Renewal is a central thematic of these sculptures, as Zhang is concerned with the environmental destruction and the implications of the climate crisis upon all living things, humans, animals and all floral alike. The sculptures also depict a non human world as metaphors for human values. For HeMas Zhang his relationship with nature is prescient, and his sculptures replete with human form, are given a dignity that implies an interdependent relationship between human beings and of nature itself. He provides these sculptures with a respect that they deserve despite their burnt suffering, acknowledging that these trees in the context of their natural environment allow us to breathe the very oxygen that we need for our collective survival. Ironically the burnt tree trunk sculptures stand in a circle surrounding an aerial video image of a green flourishing forest, suggesting an ambiguity as to whether the forest is shrinking or whether the forest is again displaying signs of life in a process of renewal and regeneration. Given the global destruction of the natural forest environments for commercial profits, this work by Zhang has a chilling quality that is politically relevant today.

In a certain way, HeMas Zhang uses his art as a means of conversation with his audience to communicate with them his concerns regarding the tenuous and precarious condition of human existence, and to remind us of the dangerous consequences of our actions as they impact on the future of planet earth itself. He utilizes strategies of beauty and aesthetics engage the questions of social change that is needed so desperately to address the looming catastrophe, for he is acutely aware that such strategies are not neutral and understands that art must share a function beyond its own aesthetics and beauty. For him the serious question lies in how he communicates these issues, and if he can successfully communicate his own concerns through his enjoyment of place for others to equally share in his enjoyment of place, then his work can function with a social responsibility as reflections on the deep history of place and the significance of the environment in relation to place. In this way he can share his awareness through his art to provoke an awareness in others, with the belief that art has a capacity to register a concern for the bigger picture, and reflect upon our sense of humanity as we contemplate our reasons of existence. Zhangs interdisciplinary exhibition works as a quiet meditation on the optimism of life, and creates a space that allows for the contemplation of a more sustainable relationship with the environment and the planet, particularly in these environmentally fragile and challenging times.

– Nicholas Tsoutas



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