



20 days in Northwest China (part 1)

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20 days in Northwest China (part 1) – Landscapes of Chen Wei Meng

There is no such thing as coincidences; everything is destined, set in motion by the Universe since time immemorial, someone once said to me – these very words which jumped to mind when approached to write this essay for Chen Wei Meng.

It was more than a decade ago when we first met; Chen then wore his hair long, his manner hesitant, bordering on shy. The artist was at my then office, fidgeting in his seat, the interview which loomed near seemed the last thing he wanted to do. What I remembered, vividly, was the animated hands, that bashful grin, and fingernails faintly encrusted with stubborn paint stains which refused to go away even after scrubbed raw. There were intimations of blue, ochre, and a tinge of crimson, all of which I found oddly-beautiful, a thing which made him distinctive. But what is forever etched in this memory were his bizarre works – paintings of putrefied roots, molluscs in the midst of an all-out war, Mengkuang trees which could have leaped from H.R. Giger’s Necronomi-con; works which were curiously alluring.

A decade on and Chen’s hands were still energetic, accentuating words with zest, with much passion. The nails were (disappointingly) immaculate, and his hair now fashioned close to skin; obsessively neat, almost military-like. That shy smile, was intact – one I suspected, even time would not be able to obliterate.

I had followed his career with interest since our last meet, from his first solo in 2007, ‘Within 30 km’, to his striking studies of the Terengganu coasts in ‘Two Three Six’, his second in 2009, and the third in 2012, ‘Silent Monsoon’; surreal, evocative delineations of cloudbursts and deluges. The Terengganu coastlines and landscape is a place he revisits often, the artist after all, was born and raised in Dungun, and traces of that delightful dialect is still audible when Chen speaks.

In his much-awaited fourth solo, the first part of 20 days in Northwest China is a pictorial documentary of an artist/ wanderlust, detailing land formations for reasons both aesthetics and limitlessness. Chen enthused, “In these series of works, I leaned towards a more instructed method of studying landscapes. I want to look at the physical forms of the land itself, and by focusing on this aspect, I observed exquisite contours and arrangements, and the results were thrilling! I can see how these geographical elements can be adapted onto canvas, I can see (in my mind’s eye) the processes involved; of how a knowledge of geology augments my landscapes in the artistic sense.”

His travels in late last year brought him to Xinjiang, Dunhuang and Qinghai Lake, a trip complemented by his life companion (charming I thought, the term of endearment). The artist had ‘sketched’ a map of his sojourns, paths which began in Urumqi, down to Turpar, Kumut, Dunhuang, Delingha, and to Qinghai Lake; a journey which, of course, as the title of his show intimates, took twenty days by land and encompassed an incredible 2250 kilometers. Part deux of 20 days in Northwest China, which will take place in later in the year will emphasise on his excursions from Qinghai Lake, culminating in his final destination, Xiamen.

Chen’s maiden voyage to China began in 2010, and the seemingly-infinite landscapes electrified and beguiled, but it was only upon his second and third trips did the artist finally yield, that the time was right, to immortalise what he had witnessed.

“The time had finally come to do this. After Silent Monsoon in 2012, I questioned my motives, my directions, and 20 days in Northwest China was perfect; giving me the opportunity to concentrate on landform characteristics, something I have always wanted to do. ” Chen thoughtfully reflected.

What was to be the artist’s life long romance with landscapes began in 2006, works which then echoed the paradigm shift he experienced as a result, direct and indirect, from the difficult decision to relocate from his birthplace Terengganu to the country’s capital, which in time, Chen grew to love. The mad cityscapes, compared to a former life tranquil, made for great canvas fodder, “My sentiments and attachments to such different elements,” the artist mused.

Dunghua to Delingha 1, 2, 3 and 4 are arrangements ruled by superb massifs, of rock-strewn corpuses that inhabits much of the paintings. In addition to its imposing existence, the elevations are incredible for the effortlessness with which they are tinted; the acuity of aloneness is continual in this series of images, replicating perhaps, that sense of detachment he felt at pivotal moments in his life. There is not a smidgeon of human or animal life in these works, but one is immediately gored by such gorgeous hues in the blue skies, ivory clouds, and gradations of sepias; one is pierced by the pellucidity and internal complexities. There is also frankness, wonder, and stresses on urgency in his works.

There is so much which entrances in these renderings; Qinghai Lake 1 and 2 have colour structures oscillating between the melancholic to a surprising luster that is allusive of a Fan Kuan (of the Song Dynasty) painting. Chen’s landscapes not only have about them the quality of agelessness, but they are also deeply nostalgic, unnerving and unquestionably stunning. The artist’s six art pen drawings on watercolour paper, NWC# (Northwest China) 1 to 6 are up close and personal studies of his visits, every crevice, ridge, plateau and terrain brilliantly inked, intended to bring us closer into the spiritual space of every landscape.

Chen has proven himself an extraordinarily good colourist, as evidenced in early works, and the ones shown here; spirited opuses enduring, of an aptitude resolute, showing his audiences how deeply he reveres that very act of creating itself. It is a gift, Chen reveals, inherited from his mother who possessed ‘magical’ hands, the alchemist with the Midas touch where all she endeavoured turned to gold.

The conversation took a turn to books, films and when steered towards music, I asked, “What would the song be, that could articulate the thoughts behind 20 Days in Northwest China?”. Chen was expecting the question I think, for his answer was whiplash quick. “A Horse with No Name”.

Released in 1971, that hallucinogenic record by the band America stirred to life by a Salvador Dali painting, and by that bizarre horse that had trodden out of an M.C. Escher image, originally titled ‘Desert Song’ (apt, within the narratives of this showing)– seized perfectly, the impressions of barren, desolate landscapes, a heartbreaking beauty of a purgatorial persuasion, of sequestration, of barely-concealed sadness:-

You see I’ve been through the desert on a horse with no name
It felt good to be out of the rain
In the desert you can remember your name
‘Cause there ain’t no one for to give you no pain

20 days in Northwest China is a kind of lovely immurement, a form of ‘imprisonment’, paintings which draw you tenderly in, where all conceivable exits become impenetrable barriers; there is no way of leaving. It is a bloodletting, a witness to the splendour of nature and the inconsequentiality of Man when equated to it. It is as Caspar David Friedrich said, “I must stay alone and know that I am alone to contemplate and feel nature in full”.

September 2014
Sarah NH Vogeler
**Sarah Vogeler is an arts writer who contributes regularly for Malaysia’s National newspaper, The News Straits Times.*

Dunhuang to Delingha 1
Acrylic on canvas
92cm x 163 cm
2013





Dunhuang to Delingha 2
Acrylic on canvas
92cm x 163 cm
2013



Dunhuang to Delingha 3
Acrylic on canvas
92cm x 326cm (Diptych)
2014



Dunhuang to Delingha 4
Acrylic on canvas
60cm x 270cm (Diptych)
2014



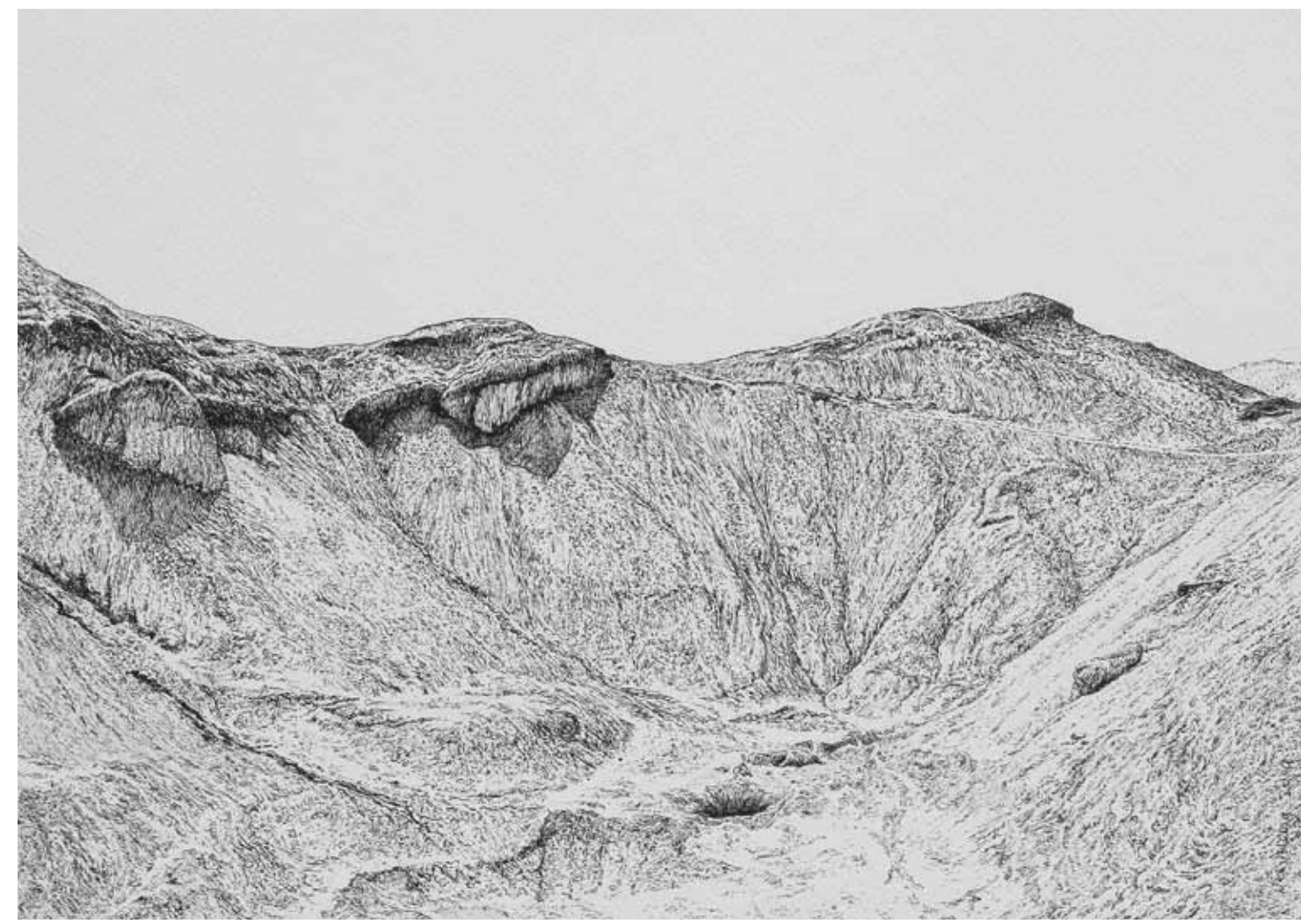
Qinghai Lake 1
Acrylic on canvas
60cm x 135 cm
2014

Qinghai Lake 2
Acrylic on canvas
90cm x 220cm
2014





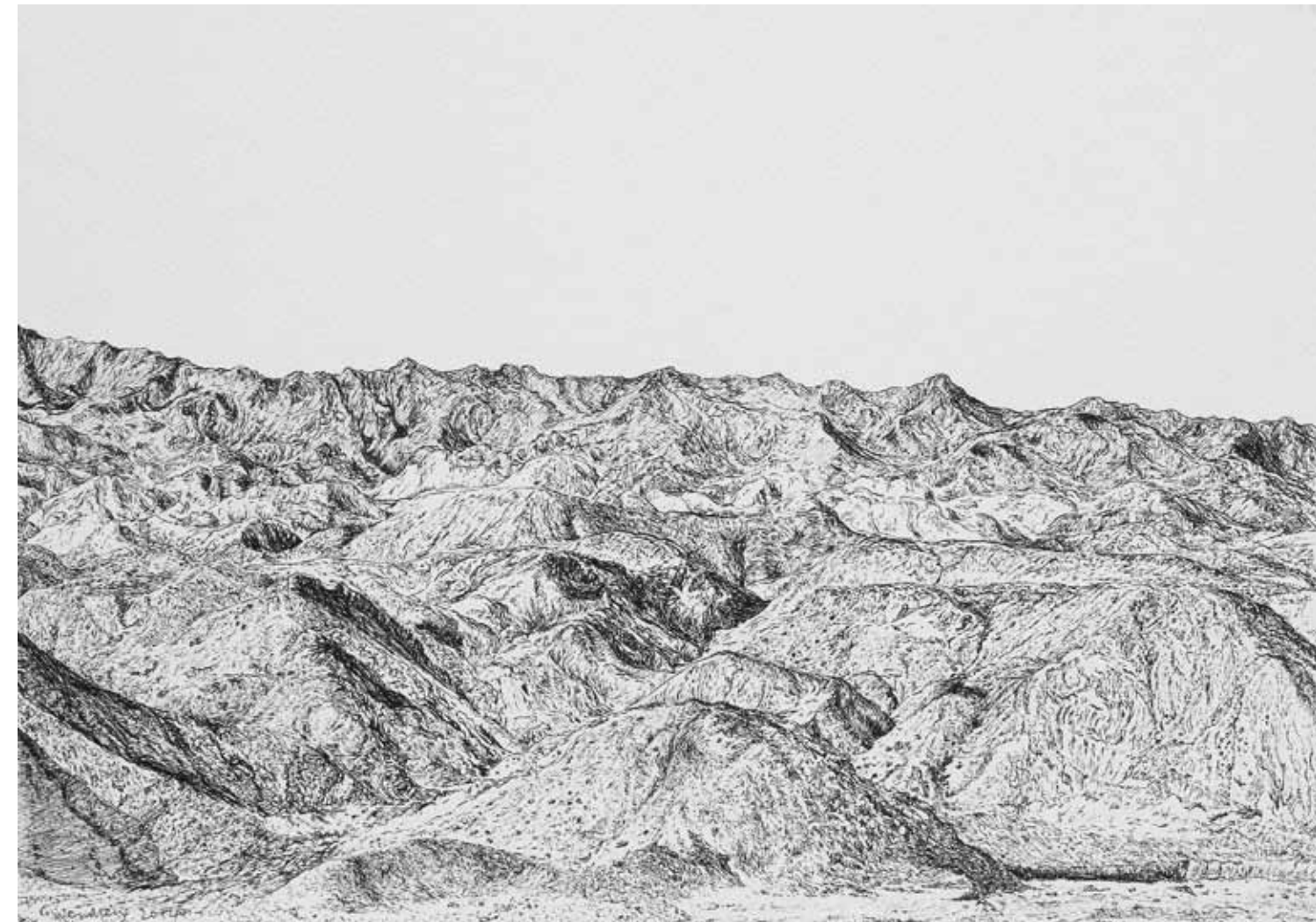
NWC #01
Ink on paper
24cm x 34 cm
2014



NWC #02
Ink on paper
24cm x 34 cm
2014



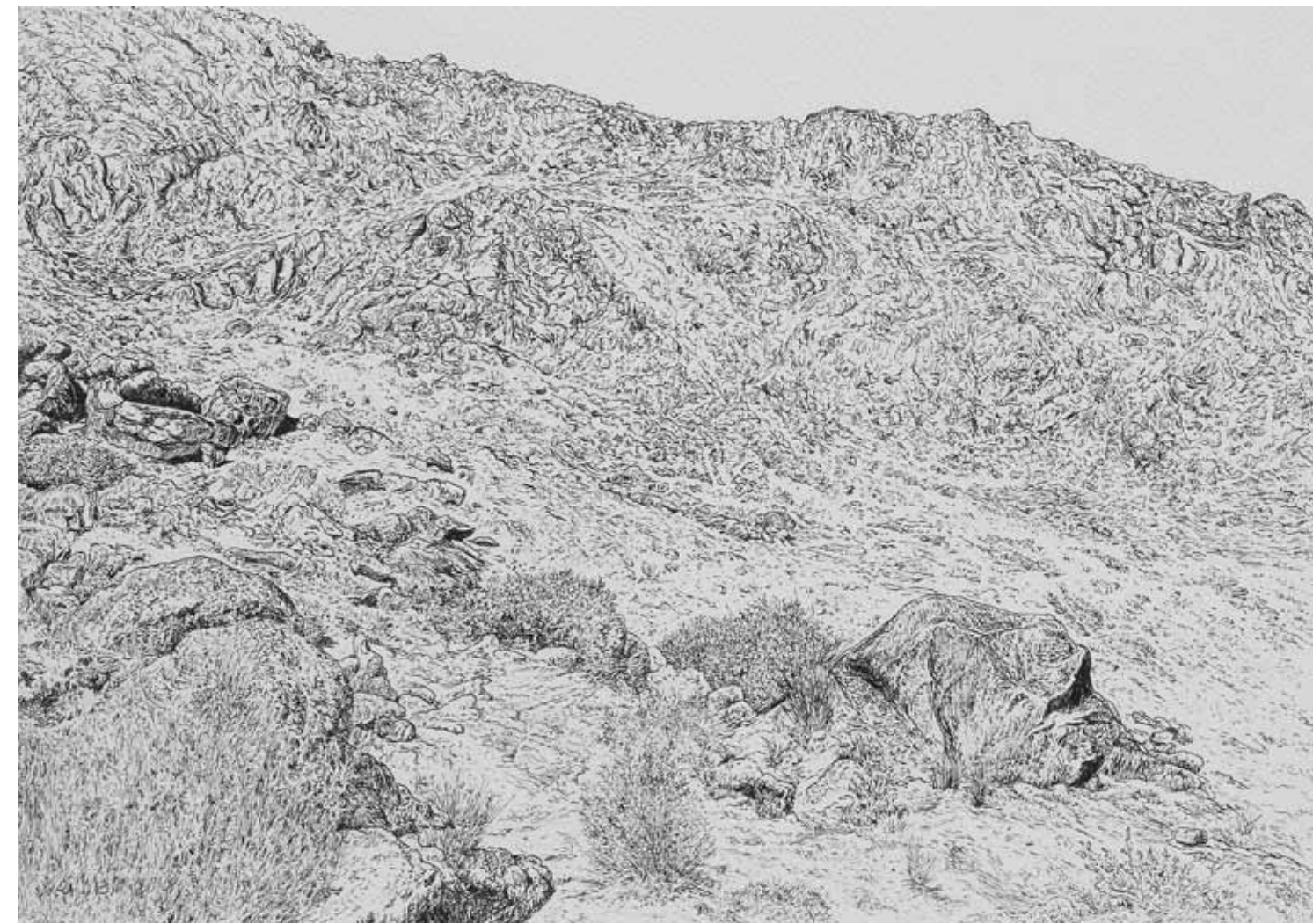
NWC #03
Ink on paper
24cm x 34 cm
2014



NWC #04
Ink on paper
24cm x 34 cm
2014



NWC #05
Ink on paper
24cm x 34 cm
2014



NWC #06
Ink on paper
24cm x 34 cm
2014



Chen Wei Meng b. 1965

Solo Exhibitions

- 2014 20 days in Northwest China (part 1), Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2012 Silent Monsoon, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2009 two three six, Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2008 Within 30 km, Reka Art Space, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2014 Ho Mia, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2012 18@8: KUL-SIN, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 18@8: KUL-SIN, Ion Art, Singapore
- Timeless, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2011 What’s Your Porn? Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2011 Malaysian Rice-Plates Project, KL Convention Centre, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2010 Heartland, Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2006 Asia Pacific Ocean International Art Exhibition, Mu Gung Hwa Centre, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 1st Art Exhibition, Mu Gung Hwa Centre, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2005 Ulek Rasa (Exhibition of Terengganu Artists), National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur
- 2004 Seoul International Star Exhibition, Gyeongju Annex Building of Seoul Museum of Art, Korea
- Second Annual Reka Free Show 2004, Reka Art Space, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2001 Malaysian Open Show 2001, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- ‘Manusia, The Human Being’ Exhibition, NN Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- (Charity Exhibition in Aid of the International Movement for a Just World)
- 2000 Buncho National Water Colour Award 2000, S.I.T Klang
- Philip Morris Malaysia Exhibition, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 1999 Aspiration Work 2000 Exhibition, Hotel Helang, Pulau Langkawi, Malaysia
- 1991 Figurative & Drawing Exhibition, Westminster Institute, London



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Cover image: Chen Wei Meng, *Qinghai Lake 2*, Acrylic on canvas, 90cm x 220cm, 2014

