The Franco-Chinese painter Yan Pei-Ming is well known for his large bichromal portraits of people like Mao Zedong, Bruce Lee, and, more recently, Barack Obama. His realistic, though at the same time abstract, style is characterized by the use of thick black, white, and sometimes red paint and violent brush strokes. Ming has painted human faces almost exclusively, though his choice of characters is very diverse: South African children, serial killers, his father, Buddha, female prisoners, prostitutes, his own skull painted from a scanned image, or simply anonymous portraits. Since 2000 he has also done self-portraits.

Earlier on, Yan Pei-Ming announced that he would like to paint only "heads" but decided, in 1996, to paint some landscapes that as an overall body of work he called *International Landscapes*, a subject he repeatedly returned to, especially in 1998, when he created a huge triptych entitled *Landscape Painted in Trièves*, but also in 2003 and in 2006. These landscapes are among the few motifs employed by Ming other than the usual heads. Two intriguing questions arise: One, why does the landscape constitute such a crucial theme, and why is it pursued with such consistency by a painter specializing in portraits? Two, why does this painter, who has resided for almost thirty years in France, call all his landscapes, without a single exception, *International Landscapes*?

Ming's landscapes are special, to say the least: rural landscapes painted at night, depressing, without the slightest trace of character or personality. François Lyotard's statement "landscapes are without destiny" comes to mind when looking at these cold and unwelcoming places. There are fields, bushes, and groups of trees, sometimes small schematic peasant houses, a pond, or a stream mysteriously illuminated by a fluorescent light. These landscapes are obviously "international" inasmuch as we encounter such objects everywhere in the world. Even with *Landscape Painted in Trièves*, nothing refers to the particularity of the geographical place. The lugubrious effect of these stereotypical places is sometimes (though not always) reinforced by a strange treatment of spatial depth that can be found also in some of Ming's portraits. One is surprised to find among these
“international landscapes” a view of Pudong-Lujiazui, Shanghai’s business quarter, which Ming paints in the same fashion: somber and enigmatic.

The morose atmosphere of this painted cityscape obviously goes against the grain of Shanghai’s splendor as an ultramodern city dominated by a Pearl Tower endowed with features that come dangerously close to kitsch. The painted cityscape acquires an “international” dimension because the view of Shanghai is entirely unoriginal, a little in the style of a postcard, and it looks like a hackneyed cliché without symbolic force.

**Landscapes and Faces**

Let us first explore some more fundamental reflections on the similarities between the landscapes and faces, since Ming himself seems to perceive an essential link here. First, landscapes are not geological masses, just as faces are not anatomical masses. Both can express temperate or communicative psychological conditions. At the same time, landscapes and faces possess a disquieting quality because they contain not only those signs that have been voluntarily put into them, but also those that have been accumulated for years. This is why faces cannot be reduced to “mental landscapes” that directly symbolize a certain psychological content.

The same is true for Ming’s *International Landscapes*. If his landscapes were “mental landscapes” symbolizing something, they would instill curiosity and not a sort of worry mixed with surprise. Landscapes and faces are “cemeteries of signs” in which are buried signs of the past; this is the reason why they are embarrassing: looking at landscapes and faces, we never cling to details, but instead we employ a meandering look that permits us to unify the entirety of the signs in the form of a system without worrying about details.

Ming bases his approach on this particularity of faces and landscapes by avoiding any reference to the concrete. This effect seems to be inherent, as Fabian Stech has noted, in the artist’s way of painting: “The images seem to float on the canvases’ surface... The image refers to nothing but itself.”

Ming’s paintings show no personal details that could refer us to some exterior quality; they are purely general, which makes them autonomous.
The Individual and the General

Ming explains that when he painted the Pope, he did not have the intention to paint a certain pope but the Pope in general. The same is true for the way he paints dictators, criminals, victims, etc. This does not mean that Ming applies to these people a symbolic language leading us from the concrete fact towards a more general meaning. On the contrary, for Ming the aesthetic truth does not reside in a rich symbolism underlining some significant characteristics but, paradoxically, in the negation of all that is personal. This is what produces a “general” aesthetic truth.

This system applies even to very personal themes. When Ming paints his father, which he has done more than forty times, he expands his father’s individuality by multiplying at random the adjectives that describe him, attaching to every portrait a personal quality expressed in the superlative: the most powerful man, the strictest man, the shiest man, the weakest man . . . . It is clear that no single person can accommodate all these qualities. At the same time, this universal father does not represent the fiction of an ideal father imagined by the artist, but, instead, it represents the real and concrete father. In other words, Ming attempts to paint the general directly and as such, but not as the sum (and potential flattening) of individual values. When Valérie Dupont says that Ming’s characters are “without expression, without nationality or race, hybrid beings looking like each other but like nobody in particular,” one has the impression that his paintings are reduced to such a compromise suggesting not more than the “average man,” while the contrary is the case. The “general father” is not the indistinct sum of all the world’s fathers, but the model of a universal father that Ming wants to see in his own father.
As I will show, Ming sees no reason to apply aesthetic schemes of the absolute or of the ideal. He expresses beauty rather—in the Chinese way—on a virtual level. Christian Besson is still right when saying that “there is some ideality in the International Landscape,” but this ideality is not reached through an abstraction from the concrete; rather, it is reached through a concrete identity searched for on an abstract level. Alain Coulange expresses this contradiction more clearly by saying that any identity “is, in brief, abstract.” The metaphor of the “photo booth” that Coulange evokes when speaking of Ming’s portraits is also useful because it suggests a direct passage from perception to presentation. For Ming, this passage necessitates a negation of all individual values in order to prevent them from obstructing the presentation of those aesthetic values searched for.

This is why Ming designs the paradoxical formula of the Portrait of an Unknown (The Artist’s Father). The subject painted is the artist’s father, but this father is grasped in the form of a “general father” and of an “unknown” (which does not mean that he is unknown to the painter). For Ming the general is not contrary to the individual. He believes that the reality of this individual who is his father can be better grasped through the revelation of his “negativity,” of his unmeasurable non-positivist qualities, that is, through the revelation of the general sense of his father’s individuality.

Ming grasps identity by negating, which becomes clearer in the following example. For the painting Chinese Quarter, Saigon, February 1st 1968, Ming has adopted the much-publicized photo of a Vietnamese man being executed by a national police chief. We know the details of the place, which establishes an authenticity that can serve as a concrete reference for a historic event. However, Ming does not want to paint this event, nor does he want
to transform it into a generalized icon without individuality. His aesthetic approach negates the concrete references in order to show us colonial cruelty in general. At the same time, it is clear that this generality can only be established by also affirming the individual. If the photo were not so well known, the painting would be aesthetically less powerful.

The universal does not estrange us from the individual; instead, they overlap. Ming neither tries to re-establish the photo’s dramatic reality nor to elevate evil to an absolute or religious level, but he shows us colonial cruelty in the form of a virtual moment (if one perceives the virtual as the opposite of the dramatic). Even if Ming was impressed by the fact that the crime took place in the Chinese quarter of Saigon, the place of the crime is neither a real nor imagined place. Nor is the crime “a pathology to be exhibited”? rather, it is a universal that needs to be evoked through a presentation of the individual whose individual quality has been denied. Aesthetic truth resides thus—in the form of a virtuality—in a banalized reality.
Concerning Mao's portraits, Ming has said that he "locates himself of course at the opposite end of Andy Warhol whose works are sublime but who treats Mao like an advertisement. But I really like Mao." The constellation comes close to what could be observed in China regarding the Mao Cult or the Mao Fever at the beginning of the 1990s, though the comparison has its limits. About four years after the Tian'anmen massacre, Mao's face would appear on badges worn by masses of young Chinese, but his portrait no longer had the same symbolic significance. The new generation negated the largest part of this icon's sense, which brought about the generalization of the Mao phenomenon until it became a purely decorative object acceptable for almost everybody. In spite of this, it is certain that Mao still inspired a considerable degree of nationalism and even affection, which reflects Ming's statement "I really like him." This is the difference between Ming's Mao and Warhol's Mao, who is full of sense, and who, as a national and international celebrity, abounds with connotations. This abundance of connotations will hide the intimate sense of Mao that Ming tries to put forward and that he reveals by negating all mundane significations. Paradoxically, it is through this procedure that Mao becomes more "international" because he becomes a universal phenomenon, not just an icon advertising "Mao."

**International Landscapes**

Ming says that he wants to paint a "non-place," but what does that mean? A non-place is the contrary of an international place in which we would find united, in a postmodern fashion, all the world's styles. At this point we can better understand the consonances between Ming the portraitist and Ming the landscapist. Ming's aim is to show the universal in the form of a concept, and the production of *International Landscapes* is part of this project. All of Ming's art is conceptually simple because it aspires to be universal. Fabian Stech claims that Ming "follows the spirit of conceptual art by limiting himself to the bichromal." Thus, what kind of concept is the "international?"

Normally, internationalization or globalization have negative connotations because they imply the loss of individual experiences and values that are present in local cultures. Ming himself affirms that today "all subjects have been internationalized to some degree; individual experience has become generalized." One possible approach would be to retrieve the lost authenticity
by integrating concrete cultural elements into one's works. This is where Ming surprises us because he looks for authenticity in the international.

It is wrong to suppose, as does Florens Deuchler, that Ming attempts to paint the uniform aspect of globalization (perhaps in order to criticize it). According to Deuchler, "[Ming] does not show the other as a unique, honoured, person, who incites you to engage in a meditative or instructive tête-à-tête, but he shows the other in a rather pessimistic fashion, like a random member of mass society, in a metropolis totally out of control. This society, where necessarily everything is synchronized, standardizes the collective bad consciences and sanctions them."12 I believe that there is no pessimism in Ming's works, but only a negativity of the sense that permits us to grasp the universal. The characters do not appear "as testimonies of a dehumanized and disindividualized world" either.13

One has to recognize that the perception of the international or the global as the opposite of the local represents an intellectual construction that we
have produced ourselves by following a logic of modernization that links the international to ideas of modernity such as the functional, liberty, etc. Within this logic, the regional is often conceived as the contrary of the modern—that is, as a notion of the individual incompatible with the general values of modernity. "Since the high period of modernism in the 1950s, 'regional' has been a pejorative term," writes Powell. According to this model, an "internationalization" of landscapes amounts to their modernization. It is obvious that Ming's method goes rather in the opposite direction. Ming intends neither to globalize the landscapes nor to use them as a showcase for a dehumanized world. He simply wants to reveal to us what is universal in them. Ming listens to the individual landscape, but subsequently applies a sort of "magic internationalism" that transcends the regional and the universal by using a paradoxical approach that reproduces the personal in the form of a general expression.

Several of Ming's *International Landscapes* receive the subtitle *Place of Crime*; however, one from 1996 also receives a second subtitle *Place of Birth of the Artist's Father.* Judging by the title, few landscapes could be more personal, but Ming also empties all concrete sense from this landscape in order to universalize the particular. The fact that the image represents the artist's father's place of birth does not instill a local (familiar, folkloric) momentum into the global, but permits us to conceive of the individual on a universal scale.

The same is true for the "aquatic emptiness" of all the *International Landscapes.* It is a metaphysical emptiness inasmuch as the negation of all concrete sense produces a multiplication of senses until one "no longer knows where one is."16 The impersonal is simply larger than the personal because it also contains all that is not said and permits us to invent stories sparked by an intriguing negativity. When we look at the portrait of "the victim" Juliette C., for example, we speculate about how the girl is a victim. And the "places of crime" landscapes plunge us into the semantic emptiness of the landscape itself because the range of possible significations is simply too vast. This is all contrary to symbolization and depends entirely on the instilling of a negativity into the painting.

The relationship between the "local" and the "international" follows the same scheme by establishing a paradoxical relation between the "given fact" and the "general universe," which is not an imagined universe. When painting the serial killer Emile Louis, Ming explains that Louis is a French problem while "killing is an international problem."17 This does not mean that we should imagine all the world's possible murders in order to grasp this painting's sense of the "international." On the contrary, there is no imagination involved at all.

**The Aesthetics of Negation**

Art manages to alter the signifying power of objects by performing an act of symbolization or a semantic displacement of the sense of alienation (the *Verfremdung*). Art can also invest its truth in an aura or try to transform the presented object into a universal icon (no matter whether the icon is Russian or Warholian). Ming's landscapes are not strange; they have no aura; they
are not icons, and symbolize nothing. Instead Ming chooses negation as a device. The negation of colour, which represents for him a "heavy cultural heritage" certainly represents the most fundamental negation within this process. Ming removes sense from the landscapes in order to invest in them an absolutely general meaning. He suggests that "any international landscape is a place of crime in which we are always victims," or "on an international level we are all victims." Then he paints The Most Intelligent Man (1995) without making the slightest effort to "paint" intelligence. According to Ming, "It is more like a sort of image passing by, I say: this one, the intelligent man. Even without seeing the image. But I make a painting. I stick a random title to it because otherwise it will have no meaning."17

The choice of macabre motifs is part of the same strategy. A series of fifteen skulls lying on flowers spread over a panel is called Artificial Landscape (2006). It is only by seeing the landscape as a non-place constituted by an emptiness of signification that we understand the landscape in general. The morbid aspect of dead landscapes represents an aesthetic necessity whose aim is the establishment of a neutral degree of signification that approaches the virtual. In the Western tradition, landscape painting is often identified with the idyllic (that is, with an abundance of pleasant significations). Ming also calls this landscape a "place of crime," which invests evil connotations into the work. However, because the significations are vague and linked to nothing concrete, the effect is rather that of neutrality and of emptiness, and this is exactly what Ming aspires to. 18 Though mysterious, the crime of the "place of crime" has no dramatic dimension.
Western Landscapes

For centuries Western painters have tried to derive the aesthetic value of landscapes from historical and mythical associations. The baroque painter Claude Lorrain painted a pastoral world often featuring castles in the background. His landscapes are lyrical, noble, idyllic, and peopled with allegorical subjects such as demi-gods and saints, creating an aestheticized landscape as if it were a separate reality. In Claude’s works, as in Nicolas Poussin’s, nature is formalized, idealized, and often dramatic because these landscapes can function as illustrations of classical narratives.

In the eighteenth century, Western landscape painting became more “conceptual” because the “geometrical regularity, orderliness and neatness, characteristic of cultivated land such as farms and orchards, were considered more beautiful than disorderly, chaotic, messy wilderness.” Still, Western landscapes continued to include classical architectural structures, and symbolism remained dominant, even in Caspar David Friedrich’s romantic landscapes, which evoked subjective and religious experiences. Compared to these paintings, Dutch landscapes of the seventeenth century are more similar to Ming’s, though they contain many more traces of civilization.

Still, in the nineteenth century, rich, poetic, and intellectual associations were considered to make landscapes more enjoyable and even potentially useful as objects of national identification able to contribute to the construction of political identities. Their lack of historical associations made American landscapes, for example, inferior in the eyes of nineteenth-century aestheticians. The aim of landscape aesthetization was to escape banality even if “banality” signified “too beautiful.” It was not sufficient to paint a beautiful landscape. The painter had to look for a certain surplus of sophistication provided by historical or mythical references.

Chinese Landscapes

There are differences between Western and Chinese landscapes that can be recognized straightaway. In Western art, the landscape “is merely a backdrop for human activity, while here the reverse is the case, and man is subordinate to the immensity of nature,” writes Munsterberg. In spite of this difference, it would be exaggerated to say that Western and Chinese landscapes are opposed to each other on all levels. Both are, for example, not only interested in representations of reality. To both a reflection on nature determines the way in which the landscape will be painted. Apart from that, “escapism” is a theme common to both, which, for the Chinese, is driven by a “yearning for the spiritual, the remote, the golden past, the homeland, or the unattainable.” This can appear in a similar way in Western painting.
In Chinese paintings the transgression of the literal—no matter whether based upon Confucian, Daoist, or Zen Buddhist reflections—guides the spectator towards a permanent validity that will not leave him in the middle of what is fragmentary and momentary. The aforementioned Western landscapists, like perhaps most other Western landscapists, would not be diametrically opposed to this approach, but it appears that Chinese painters pursue this route towards the essential with more consistency and by using a more conceptual approach.

Munsterberg claims that "while Western artists were usually content with an exterior likeness, the Chinese painter wished to portray the very essence of the tree." Let us stay with this model even if it oversimplifies the state of affairs by saying that Western painters limit themselves to outer resemblance. After having absorbed all of the tree’s characteristics, the Chinese painter paints—what exactly? He paints the tree with all its individuality and particular expressivity, but still he does not paint the individual tree because this tree does not exist in the real world. The painted tree is an imagined tree; it is the general tree, which still impresses us through its individual and particular expression. More generally speaking, Chinese painters do not paint a well-defined subject but, according to François Jullien, "the world itself" by reproducing its ceaseless process. The "internationalism" that aims to reproduce the world itself reveals Ming’s Chinese aesthetic input. He contends that "I could make a landscape of Shanghai that one would call 'painted in Shanghai' but which does not show a Shanghai landscape—though it can be a landscape 'of Shanghai.' It is an imaginary world." Like Ming, the classical Chinese painter also "prefers to rely on his own imagination, and arranges the elements as though he were building a model. From his mind-heart (xīn) he selects mountains." Aesthetic experience is an experience of the highest state of mind-heart," writes Li Zehou, and the aesthetic essence is more important than the exterior appearance.

François Jullien tells us of the fourteenth-century painter Ni Zan, who painted the same landscape over and over all his life. He did not do so because he was attached to certain motifs, but to show how much he was detached from this particular landscape. Ni Zan’s landscapes were "monotonous and monochrome," embracing "all landscapes—where all landscapes mix and become similar." The point to which Ming follows the Chinese tradition becomes clear. Thus, it remains even more amazing that he would call his landscapes International Landscapes.

The Chinese painter negates reality in order to find a Reality with a capital R, which transcends the actual forms and represents a Reality in a state that precedes its actualization. For Ming this Reality is international. The international is not a "beyond," it is not a Platonic ideal form, but simply a process; it is the process of the world, which is exactly how the Chinese conceive the world. The world is a "course" or a way (dào) that needs to be reproduced through painting.

In the fourth century, Tsung Ping suggested "that landscape painting might be just as good a way of apprehending the order of things as meditating upon the Tao." For Ming, the order of things is the universal state of the world, which is opposed to both an idyllic regionalization and a global, depersonalized order. What Ming finds in his mind-heart is the universal order, which he expresses through the negation of individual characteristics and which becomes for him "international."
It is important to note in this context that the distinction between nature and civilization (the latter overcoming the former) does not exist in Chinese thought because the real sense of “apprehending the order of things” cannot be explained with the help of this model. “In the West, the literary work appears more and more as competing with nature. Nature is lost,” says Jullien. This represents one of the largest differences between China and the West in the domain of aesthetics. Hegel explains on the first pages of his Lectures on Aesthetics that artistic beauty is superior to natural beauty, which “is born from spirit.” The essence of the beautiful appears only in art and never in nature.

In China, on the other hand, painting is not opposed to nature, but captures its essence. Art is nature inasmuch as the artist transmits the natural pattern of things, the wen. It follows that any artistic creation is not really a creation but rather an imitation: The sages imitated “the patterns [wen] of Heaven; and the process of transmission, overseen by Heaven, was achieved through the replication of these patterns,” explains Michael Puett. The artist only transmits the order of things; he does not invent it, and “poetry flows forth as a part of the phenomenon of nature.”

Jullien concludes that “the aesthetic value of the natural landscape manifests itself spontaneously without art’s ‘revelation,’ and in the realm of Beauty it is impossible to distinguish between the beauty of nature and that of art.” This is how Ming paints a canon of nature that becomes art and essential through the simple negation of all that is accidental.

It has been said above that the impersonal permits us to invent stories proceeding from an intriguing negativity. Jullien identifies this negativity as blandness (dan), which he finds concentrated in traditional Chinese painting. Dan (which signifies also detachment or simplicity) is always richer than a more pronounced taste because through limpidity and blandness “the smallest traits and signs breathe at the bottom of themselves the presence of Emptiness (wu, xu), which transcends their phenomenal character and opens them towards the absolute.”

The bland is linked to the concepts of emptiness of Daoism and Chan Buddhism. As an aesthetic ideal it is primordial for landscape painting because it “bathes the landscapes in absence.” According to Jullien, the bland is opposed to the mediocre as much as to the Aristotelian “medium” (mesoté), but represents a sublime neutrality signalling a virtuality that exists before any actualization. The character dan actually represents fire and water, which expresses neutrality. The reality of these paintings is virtual because it “excludes no other possibilities it is caught in the suspense between the ‘there is’ and the ‘there is not,’ forming/de-forming—‘alive’—but not formed.”

Ming’s paintings are bland, but this is only a first sensation. Behind the blandness we suspect “potentialities of taste richer and more varied than those that are first confused during one sensation—potentialities which existed first as virtualities.” The presence-absence of things provoked by the lack of flavor makes Ming’s landscapes interesting.

Ming’s International Landscapes are universal and not globalized. Blandness, as it has been stated above, negates any particular point of view and leads
towards a universalization. Universalization signifies the negation of all particular traits (prejudices, ready-made ideas) that obstruct our view of the broader generality of phenomena. This is what opposes universalization to globalization. The universal aspect of the world suggests, for example, that humanity is not only a biological entity, but a unified whole revealing the universality of human rights. Here the rational knowledge of the whole is not founded on the social and cultural conditions of diverse citizenships, but is recognized straightforwardly as a universal. At the same time it is clear that there is no universal without particular differences. If everything is the same, the "universal" has no meaning.

Ming’s *International Landscapes* are universal and not global because they get stuck neither in an idyllic regionalism nor in a technical generalization of the particular (which is globalization). According to a Daoist principle that Ming applies in his landscapes, “The greatest image is without form.” Ming shows us that all landscapes are international, but that our prejudices prevent us from seeing them as such. Instead of recognizing their universal character, we globalize, unify, and standardize them.