

Yi Ling's *Australia* is a farewell gift from the artist to then Australian ambassador to China Geoff Raby. The painting comprises images and texts that sum up the ambassador's time spent in Beijing as witnessed through the lens of his artist friends. Yi Ling's works have often been referred to as a kind of 'map', linked to the artist's travels and his previous experience as a cartographer (Soemo Fine Art). His composition comprises abstract symbols, texts in both Chinese and English and embedded figures, creating a labyrinth with no start and no end. At the centre of the painting we can make out the figure of a reclining nude woman, an aeroplane emerging out of her torso, a sitting kangaroo next to it. The words 'Sydney Opera House', 'Australia', 'Canberra' and 'Melbourne' are written across them, suggesting a reading or impression of what constitutes Australia that is not unlike that commonly presented on postcards, souvenirs and large billboards at airports. This list of cities also reflects Geoff Raby's homes and residences in Australia.

In the centre, we can also read the words 'stock market' and 'Ambassador Geoff Raby' (a reference to the recipient of this work). Towards the upper-right corner is an image of Caishen, the Chinese God of Money, holding a scroll that reads 'Gong Xi Fa Cai' (Happy New Year). The interweaving lines, texts and images of Australia and China express the complex relationship of the two countries and the role of culture when navigating between them. Being a farewell gift to ambassador Raby, these references also demonstrate the ambassador's role and relations.

When viewing Yi Ling's work, we are tempted to decode images, decipher meanings and trace pathways. The artist notes:

Some people look at my work and see nothing but the colours. I have drawn cars, buildings, clothes, but they don't see a thing. So you could say I have put everything in one painting, or that there's nothing in my painting. It totally depends on the viewer (Cunningham 2014).

Yi's statement recalls Taoist philosophy *wu wei*, that nothing is everything and everything is nothing. Yi Ling's paintings, then, invite us to reflect on what is seen and unseen, but more importantly on what we choose to see in a painting – or in a person, place or culture – and where we position ourselves. Considered in the context of the work as a parting gift to a diplomat, *Australia* is both a memento of Geoff Raby's time in Beijing and a celebration of the many friendships he has cultivated throughout the years.

Bianca Winataputri, 2022



Australia, 2010
mixed media on paper

La Trobe University, Geoff Raby Collection of Chinese Art.
Donated by Dr Geoff Raby AO through the Australian
Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2019. © Yi Ling.
Photo: Jia De

References:

Cunningham, N 2014, *Yi Ling studio visit*, viewed 30 January 2022, <https://niamhcunningham.com/studio-visit-yi-ling/>.

Soemo Fine Art, *Yi Ling*, viewed 3 February 2022, <http://soemo-fine-arts.com/artist?id=776>.