

These works offer a pair of letters to the past in the form of minor history paintings, the record of hours spent intimately pressed up against the foggy glass of memory. The first, *Couple's portrait 1* (2013), from the series *Portrait*, is a modestly sized watercolour painted in sepia tones, detailing a warmly dressed couple holding a baby. The second, *Reunion II* (2013), from the *Peace* series, depicts two young soldiers standing shoulder-to-shoulder at the foreground of a square with a large-scale poster (perhaps of Mao) bracketed by political slogans occluded in the distance, seen as if through fog. This idiosyncratically soft and grainy effect is achieved by mixing oil paint with egg tempera, a medium of 'precision and tenderness' that the artist Jiang Shan Chun contrasts to the clarity and 'physicality' of oil painting (de Wolfe Pettit 2010, p. 65). The images for Jiang's *Peace* series were sourced from old photographs that the artist found during a trip to his birthplace of Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, dating from the period between the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and the Reform and Opening Up policies initiated in 1978 (de Wolfe Pettit & Li [eds] 2015). The filmic texture that Jiang employs in depicting these figures works to 'keep distance from reality', producing soft images that seem to mark the passage of time while also existing outside of it (de Wolfe Pettit 2010, p. 65).

This distance, which might refer to the slow degradation of memory – the blurred face of someone once known but unseen for many years – or to the impenetrability of the past when viewed from the present, is reinforced by the oblique and formal expressions of Jiang's sitters. Their impassivity reveals nothing of an inner emotional landscape. Though the title of one work suggests it is a reunion, there is neither joy nor discomfort to be found, nor any evidence of a bond between the reunited.

Jiang's deliberate courting of ambiguity can be read as an effort to rehabilitate the image of ordinary Chinese citizens, banished almost entirely from China's visual culture of the period from which these photographs are drawn. Socialist realism, a style of oil painting that became the official artistic style in the early days of the People's Republic of China, had space only for the depiction of 'the people': generic workers, soldiers and peasants pictured energetically and joyfully building a new classless and revolutionary society. In contrast, Jiang's sitters, serene within their muted settings, suggest a far more ambivalent relationship to the nation and to the history that is unfolding around them.

Genevieve Trail, 2022



'Reunion II' from the series 'Peace', 2013
oil on canvas



'Couple's portrait 1' from the series 'Portrait', 2013
watercolour on paper

La Trobe University, Geoff Raby Collection of Chinese Art.
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Photos: Jia De

References:

de Wolfe Pettit, Emily 2010, 'Interview with Jiang Shan Chun, Emily de Wolfe Pettit and Christopher Atkins', in E de Wolfe Pettit (ed.), *Jiang Shan Chun, The refutation of time*, Atkins & Ai Gallery, Beijing.

de Wolfe Pettit, E & Li, Y (eds) 2015, *Making peace with history: the 'Peace' series, Jiang Shan Chun solo exhibition*, Peking Art Associates, Beijing.