

GALLERY

ZHANG KECHUN

by JOSH LUSTIG

Translated, its Mongolian name means something like “the place on Earth most like the moon”, and since opening to the public last year, the Heidushān mountains in China’s Gobi desert have become a popular tourist destination. “Thanks to promotional photos on social media, tourists have flocked to the area,” photographer Zhang Kechun tells me. “I arrived in the afternoon, bought a ticket and entered the scenic area. After the shuttle bus drove for over 10 kilometres, the undulating black mountains gradually came into view, truly like a watercolour painting splashed on the Earth.”

After the Mongol conquest of China in the 13th century ended the Song dynasty and ushered in the Yuan, Chinese landscape painting went through a fundamental change. Known as “literati painting”, landscape artists of the Yuan dynasty chose to depict the landscape to reflect their opposition to Mongol rule. Art became political. Paintings became more impressionistic, the brush strokes more emotive, the lines more calligraphic. Negative space was used to convey feelings of disquiet and conjure notions of the sublime. Human figures were usually tiny, dwarfed by their natural surroundings.

“A large part of my photographic work reflects my misinterpretation of Chinese landscape painting,” Zhang says. The yellow hue of his photographs match the time-worn yellows of Yuan dynasty paintings. But it isn’t just the colour palette. The anxiety that was being reflected in the paintings of the Yuan dynasty can also be felt in Zhang’s photographs. The commodification of China’s natural environment has ramped up in recent years. Busloads of tourists now descend on once-pristine landscapes throughout the high season. “Because it was summer vacation,” Zhang explains, “the area was overcrowded with tourists, and the originally black mountains had been trampled into the yellow of the desert.”

Zhang’s images are a reflection of the current moment, where experiences are often measured by how Instagrammable they are. They depict the unease between the quest for natural beauty and artifice. Much of the Gobi desert that Zhang photographed for this series has been used for film sets, and the landscape is dotted with surreal reconstructions of ancient religious sites, as well as genuine graves that date back millennia to the Han dynasty. Abandoned towns and former oil extraction sites are slowly being reclaimed by the desert, just as footpaths and bus routes are laid in their wake. **FT**

“Zhang Kechun: *The Yellow Desert*” is at Huxley-Parlour, London until February 28; huxleyparlour.com



'PEOPLE TRAVELLING IN HEIDUSHĀN', 2025