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'CITY LIGHT' SENDS MIND ON A ROMP AT MCA DENVER

By Mary Voelz Chandler

Inside every beaten-down worker is an adventurer yearning to break free.

Or perhaps it's just that as we go about our daily duties — interesting though they may sometimes be — admit it: Often, we'd really rather be someplace else.

In a nutshell, that's the impression taken away after viewing Yang Fudong's *City Light*, a new video installation at MCA DENVER. This 6-minute work is all about where our minds take us when our bodies can't go along. Or, in the case of the two men who play alter egos here, where our body can't go, but perhaps the other half of our personality can.

For the nameless characters in *City Light*, that's on an occasional romp through the streets of Shanghai, apparently emulating James Bond and other action heroes. The actors do not look alike, do not dress alike, and only one wears a wedding ring.

Yet when they walk across the street into a giant office building or through a hallway into their apartment, one carries an umbrella and another mimics that stance. When one aims a pistol, the other one apes him. When one dances with his girlfriend, the other one does, too, in occasional sections shot in black-and-white and set to the dreamy bossa nova beat of *Quiet Nights of Quiet Stars*.

When one lies down to sleep, fully dressed, the other one does, too.



YANG FUDONG. *CITY LIGHT* (FILM STILL), 2000, COLOR VIDEO WITH SOUND, 6 MINUTES. COURTESY MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK.



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And when one sort of goes through the motions, alone, of a slow dance — with that pained “I’d rather be anywhere else” look on his face men get while dancing — it becomes, somehow, ethereally funny, and not a little disconcerting.

The three actors here — Xie Bin, Hu Han and Wang ZhaJun — play it straight, though, with two of them behaving as if inseparable and the third looking charming. No one speaks, and no one needs to. It’s all about the life of the exterior and interior, the body and the mind, and how they can separate in an act of dealing with the boredom of alienation and routine without ritual.

Yang began his career as a photographer, and that shows in *City Light*. His shots are beautifully composed and suffused with light, often the soft, golden glow of the setting sun.

That’s how the video ends, with the two men and the one woman sitting in a typical office setting, by the big windows, looking bored and lost in thought.

It begins with the title and a pinhole shot that suggests (or at least sounds like) a sexual act, but that, too, is ambiguous, as is everything about this venture into another culture’s take on how to pass the days. From then on, *City Light* is platonic to the extreme.

Yang was born in 1971 in Beijing, and in 1995 graduated from the China Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou.

He’s part of the second wave of Chinese video artists, says Julie Segraves, head of the Asian Art Coordination Council, whose many trips to China, resulting in the curation of many shows of work from contemporary artists there, have given her a special insight into what is going on in that artistic powerhouse of a country. (The installation was curated by Cydney Payton, former executive director and chief curator of MCA DENVER, who left the museum well prepared for 2009.)

Political issues are not the meat of what that particular generation of artists is about.

Rather, dealing with the fast-changing way of life there and its impact on social and economic issues become themes that color this group of artists’ works.

That is evident in *City Light*, where one man is split into two entities: They travel together, but seem bent on different goals, a condition that becomes more universal as time goes by.