

ZHOU Xiaohou

(Born 1960 in Changzhou, China. Lives and works in Shanghai.)



***The Garden of Forking Paths* (2016)**, HD video animation, 20:04, colour, sound

Paradox, absurdity and contradiction figure strongly in Zhou Xiaohou's *The Garden of Forking Paths*, based on the eponymous mystery by the Argentine writer, essayist and poet Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986). Jorge Luis Borges's iconic short story "*The Garden of Forking Paths*" (1941) is at once a spy thriller, a philosophical parable, and an early literary exploration of what we now call the multiverse. The narrative unfolds as a metafictional labyrinth in which time is not linear but proliferates into infinite, coexisting possibilities. Told through the voice of a spy going to extreme lengths to complete his mission, the story introduces a fictional novel by the narrator's ancestor—a book conceived as a shifting garden where every possible outcome of every event occurs simultaneously in diverging and converging paths.

Set during World War I, the story follows Dr. Yu Tsun, a Chinese professor and covert German agent, who must urgently transmit the location of a British artillery base to his superiors. Pursued through the English countryside by a relentless British counter-espionage agent, Yu Tsun seeks refuge in the home of a man named Stephen Albert. Chosen for his surname, which is to become the coded message Yu Tsun must send, this particular Stephen Albert turns out to be a sinologist—who, in a strange coincidence, happens to be an expert on the life and work of Yu Tsun's own ancestor, Ts'ui Pên.

Ts'ui Pên had once renounced political life to devote himself to writing a sprawling, incomprehensible novel and constructing a labyrinth. For generations, readers and scholars have failed to make sense of either. But in a revelatory moment, Albert explains to Yu Tsun that Ts'ui Pên's book *is* the labyrinth—a nonlinear narrative in which every possible decision creates a divergent timeline. In this metaphysical garden, all outcomes occur simultaneously: every path taken, and every path not taken, coexist in parallel. The labyrinth is not a structure of walls, but of time itself.

Shortly after this epiphany, Yu Tsun kills Albert—not out of malice, but as a coded act. By ensuring Albert's name appears in the newspapers, he conveys the location of the British artillery - Albert being the town of Albert in France - to his German handlers. The story ends with Yu Tsun executed for his crime, having completed his mission. But the philosophical implications of Ts'ui Pên's labyrinth haunt the reader far beyond the plot's resolution. In Borges's universe, just as in Ts'ui Pên's labyrinthine book, time is not a singular thread but a tangled web of choices, all real, all unfolding in parallel. The garden, thus, becomes a metaphor for the multiverse—a space where memory, identity, and future are endlessly forked and recombined.

Zhou Xiaohu's artwork *The Garden of Forking Paths* borrows its title and conceptual architecture from Borges, translating the literary labyrinth into a time-based visual installation. Using his signature language of puppets and digital animation, Zhou crafts a fragmented, nonlinear narrative composed of looping scenes that shift between historical memory, political absurdity, and imagined futures. The work eschews a single point of view, instead presenting viewers with parallel scenarios that echo, contradict, or bleed into one another. Figures and backgrounds are animated in crude yet expressive gestures, suggesting history not as a fixed timeline, but as a malleable landscape.

Together, Borges's story and Zhou's reinterpretation imagine reality as a terrain of simultaneities, where futures are not destinations but recursive returns, and the past is never quite settled. Borges's metaphorical garden and Zhou's animated one converge as sites of speculative memory—landscapes in which histories are rehearsed, overwritten, and re-seeded across generations. Zhou's work reflects on how narratives are constructed and fractured over time, while Borges's story provides a philosophical framework for understanding time itself as spatial, plural, and unstable.

In *Landscapes of Futures Past*, Zhou Xiaohu's *The Garden of Forking Paths* operates as both homage and critical translation—reconfiguring Borges's abstract metaphysics into a visceral, satirical terrain where

historical and philosophical time collide. It invites viewers to wander not through a singular storyline, but through a multiplicity of temporalities that mirror the uncertainties of our ecological and cultural moment: where each step into the past forks into yet another future, and the landscape itself becomes a living archive of what might have been—and what still could be.

ARTIST BIO

<http://www.longmarchspace.com/zh/artists/zhou-xiaohu-2/>

Zhou Xiaohu is a pioneering figure in Chinese contemporary art, celebrated as one of the first to develop claymation and stop-motion video animation in the region. Trained in sculpture and oil painting at the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts, he began using computers as an artistic tool in 1998. He has since experimented with stop-frame video animation, video installation and computer-gaming software by interlayering images between moving pictures and real objects in what has become his signature style. His work defies genre boundaries by combining animation, video, installation, performance, photography, and sculpture. Drawing on techniques from folk puppetry, popular media, and classical art forms, Zhou orchestrates biting social satire that critiques the mediated production of reality and the absurdities of modern public life.

Zhou's interdisciplinary practice reflects the documentation of and misunderstandings of history in a digital age. His work offers a provocative exploration of mediated reality—using puppetry and animation as metaphors for spectacle and absurdity in contemporary culture. Through meticulously crafted claymation scenes re-enacting news events, social spectacles, and folklore, his installations dismantle the authority of media while exposing how spectacle shapes collective perception. With roots in Chinese folk forms and engagement with philosophical parody, Zhou's artistic vision challenges viewers to question the line between fact and fiction, and to see how narratives are constructed, circulated, and internalized. Using absurdist narratives and puppet-like figures, Zhou Xiaohu probes the social and philosophical landscapes of contemporary life.

Selected major exhibitions include: *Permaculture*, Zhou Xiaohu Solo Exhibition, Biyun Art Museum, Shanghai China (2024); The 14th Shanghai Biennale (2023); 2nd Bangkok Art Biennale (2020); *Chimera: Zhou Xiaohu Solo Exhibition*, Shanghai Minsheng Art Museum, China (2016); *Schiesse: Zhou Xiaohu Solo Exhibition*, MOMENTUM, Bethanien Art Center, Berlin, Germany (2015); *Harmonious Society*, Asia Triennial, Manchester, UK (2014); White Rabbit Gallery, Sydney, Australia (2013); *Panorama: Recent Art from Contemporary Asia*, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore (2012); 4th Guangzhou Triennial -Grangdview project, Guangzhou, China (2012); Barbican Art Gallery, London, UK (2011); National Art Museum of China, Beijing, China (2011); 40th International Film Festival Rotterdam in Netherland (2011); *Not Soul For Sale*, Tate Modern Turbine Hall, London, UK (2010); 8th Gwangju Biennial, Gwangju, South Korea (2010); Tate Liverpool, Liverpool, UK, (2007); Museum Moderner Kunst, Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna, Austria

(2007); Kunst Museum Bern, Bern, Switzerland (2007); Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Brisbane, Australia (2006); *The Utopia Machine*, MoMA Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA (2004); 1st Seville Biennial, Seville, Spain (2004); *Between Past and Future*, International Center of Photography, New York, USA (2004); 56th International Film Festival Locarno, Locarno Switzerland (2003); Experimental Video Gold Medal Award, 36th World Fest-Houston International Film Festival (2003); *China Rushes*, Hamburger Bahnhof National Museum, Berlin, Germany (2001); 3rd Shanghai Biennale (2000); amongst many others.