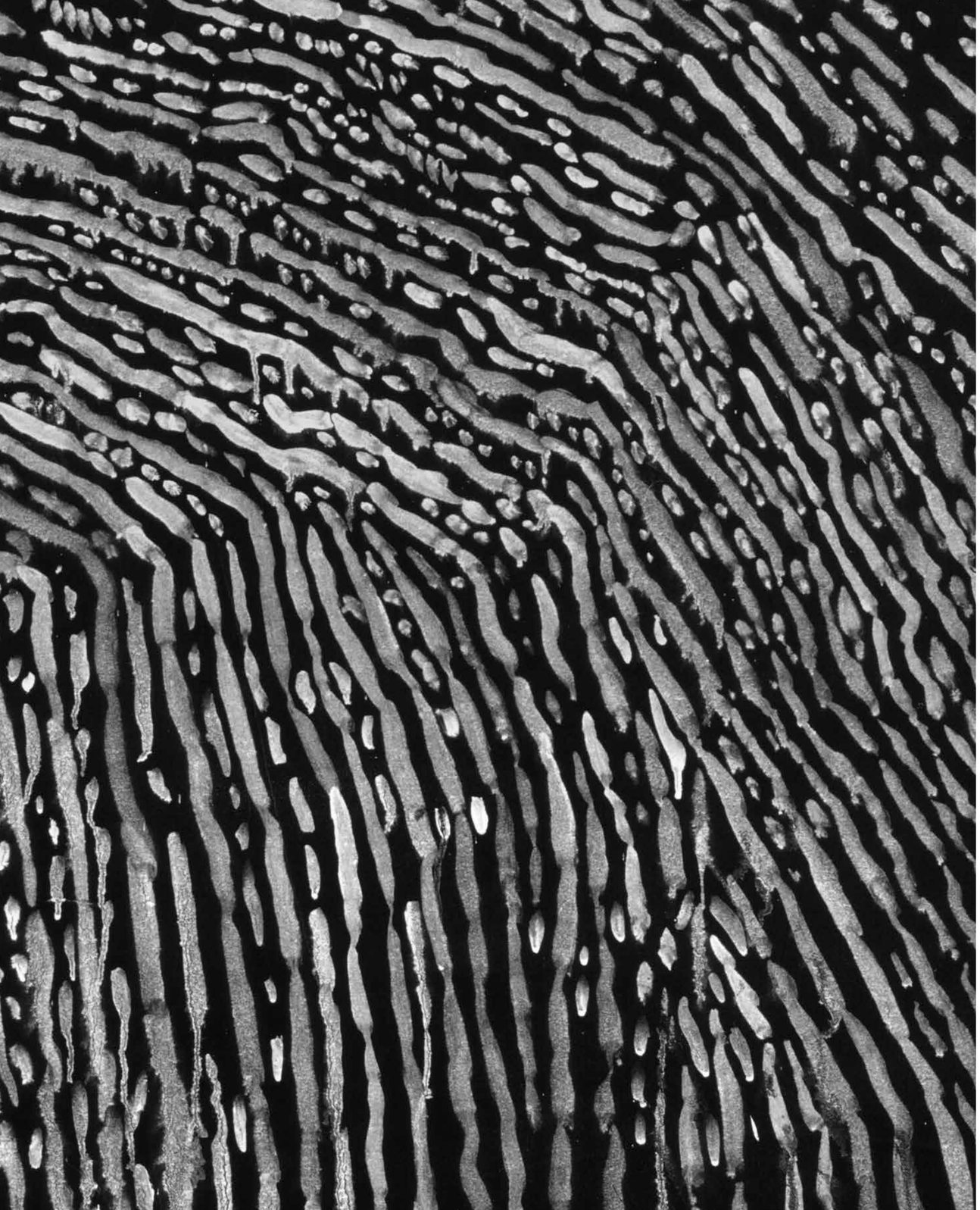
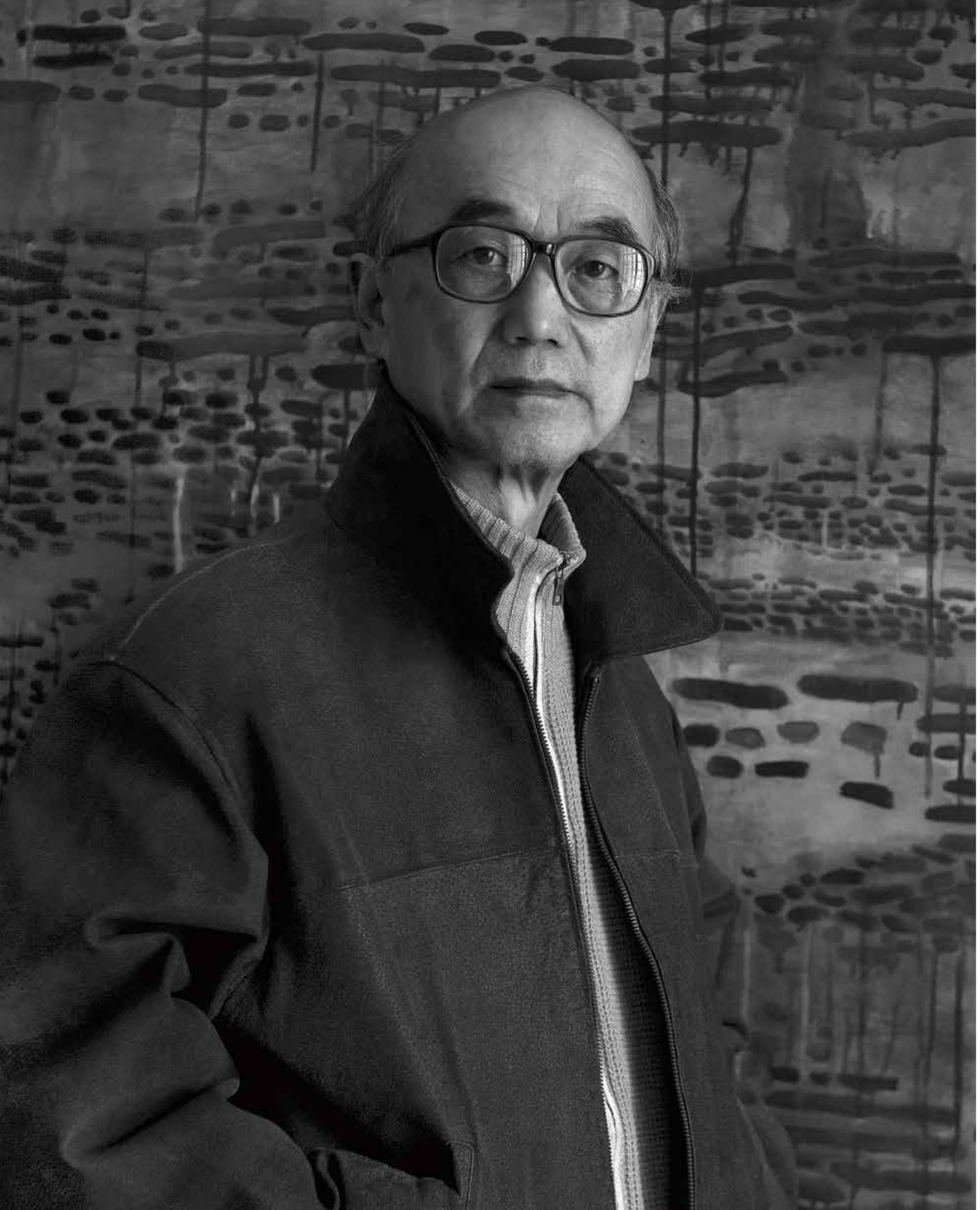


Yu Youhan



Paul Gladston

Foreword by

Matthew Collings

YU YOUHAN

3030Press

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Paul Gladston

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Front cover: Detail of Yu Youhan, *Mao Portrait*. undated (see plate 113)

Back cover: Detail of Yu Youhan, *2013.05.29*. 2013 (see plate 170)

Endpapers: Detail of Yu Youhan, *Circle 1986-3*. 1986 (see plate 55)

Frontispiece: Yu Youhan, self portrait. 2015. Courtesy of the artist

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Foreword

TO MANY WESTERNERS, CHINESE contemporary art — since the 1990s, highly publicized internationally and selling at auction for staggering amounts — might appear to be a mixture of the obscure and the obvious, all taking place in some bizarre, alternative world. Yu Youhan is not only a representative artist of this realm, but could also be considered its most subtle and interesting example. His output since the 1970s has been changeable, including types of art that seem to have little to do with each other. He has painted modernist abstractions in a soft-geometric, warm-hued lyrical style, like Paul Klee; confusing portraits of Mao that resemble propaganda but require deciphering; a form of abstraction in which a roughly circular shape is created out of innumerable, floating, small, loose brush strokes, often avoiding colours other than black and white; and frankly illustrational landscapes depicting the Yimeng mountain region. How do we make sense of this body of work?

We're used to the multi-style approach of Gerhard Richter. We've been conditioned to believe that for many decades he's been staging a philosophical enquiry into reality. Plus, we revere him as a walking embodiment of historic importance. He left the socialist East for the capitalist West; he is grimly doubtful about belief of any kind; ideology must be made impossible by art; this is the aim he achieves repeatedly, across his entire body of work with all its range, from blunt and inert to objects defined by delicate nuance. If Yu is a multi-stylist we should be able to interpret him along Richter lines, we imagine. He, too, embodies historical significant moments.

As the present book of strange revelation informs us, Yu is aware of Richter, but he isn't against ideology. If he suffered from the events that took place across the PRC in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and regards with bitterness his wasted years at an art academy during that time where he was denounced as coming from a bourgeois capitalist background, persecuted and never taught anything, nevertheless he is not bitter about Mao. When he adds flowers, patterns and attractive women to his depictions of Mao these are intended as metaphors for a softening and humanising of harshness, a correcting of unfortunate wrong turnings.

Yu's Maos, the part of his work that is perhaps most attractive to a westerner but possibly least understandable, are certainly quirky. The relevant western model must be Warhol, but the departures from it are numerous and obvious. Mao's public image is rendered beautiful by Warhol in lilac and yellow, black and sky blue, and many rococo variations. It is a de-gendered, lipsticked, towering deity, a modern Athena within countless streamlined, spacious public museums and art centres, present-day versions of the ancient Parthenon. It symbolizes nothing but the power of images, and is equal with Troy Donahue and a filmed blowjob, a screen test for Nico and an interview in *Interview* with Nancy Reagan. By contrast, Yu's Maos are obviously 'made' objects: humbly created by a sure hand that approaches paint, brushes, canvas and palette as simple tools, and approaches imagery as something that might be ready made and found in printed form to begin with, but nevertheless must be laboriously and prosaically manufactured.

Warhol is relentlessly satirical. Far from his camp, sophisticated, estranged objects, in which the historic status of painting is fundamentally undermined because a printing technique is used and the brush strokes are throwaway, vast scribbles, Yu's Maos are not even particularly humorous. He seems fond where Warhol plays a complicated game of pretending to have no feelings. Yu's Mao is kind, where Warhol's is a mirror of uncertainty. With Warhol a newspaper and TV image becomes a throwaway, giant Pop experience, beautiful but not intentionally so.

Yu's aestheticism with *his* Mao is odd, too, but for different reasons. A leader and an ideology for Yu are still those things, well known and thoroughly part of life. He paints warmly in relation to a content that for him might be problematic, but he can identify with it directly.

Concepts that we've become used to in the West through analysis of the deep currents of our own postmodernism, are deployed in Paul Gladston's account of Yu's art and attitudes in a way that is ultimately clear — the picture that emerges is surprisingly mesmerizing — but also often initially giddying. Chiasmus, 'sous-rature' and trace form meet high modernism, criticality and Neoliberalism. But also the unexpected return of Confucianism in a context of rising Chinese nationalism. In this world, modernity is not signified definitively by a move into the abstract. Mao's demand for artistic realism, following the model established in the USSR, is not reactionary but replete with potential, not for irony but optimism. Yu is not really against abstract beauty, nor for it; nor for social realism, nor against it; nor reactionary, nor progressive in his pursuit of a painted landscape scene that has popular appeal.

It's odd from a western perspective to think that Yu began painting Klee-like abstracts in 1979, after years of privately painted post-impressionist landscapes and portraits, inspired by reproductions in books. In the West in 1979 abstraction still existed; it was marketable and discussed critically, but it was no longer considered remotely radical. Klee was a remote figure, a subject for posters on the bedroom wall at a certain stage in life. Abstraction was merely academic, high late-modernism. Jokey post-abstract art, and, in fact, a return to expressionist figuration — also with an atmosphere of ironic detachment that frequently had a sort of black humour about it — were each considered in their way to be more intelligently tuned in to modernity's paradoxical realities than abstraction.

With his own abstracts of the late 1970s and early 1980s, Yu shows his admiration for western modernism. In fact, a sort of generic early-modernist handling is recognisable throughout his work, whether he's painting Klee-like abstracts or imitations of Pop. It is broad and loose, the surface frank, a sense of material factuality is emphasized.

It's odd when we read in the present book about an essay by Wu Guanzhong on the precedence of form over depiction of reality, to think that this had a profound effect in China during the 1980s. In typical western mythologies of modernism, such a scenario has its place in the 1930s as part of Jackson Pollock's biography, or Richter's in the 1950s. Yu took his place in the public debate that followed the publication of this essay, keeping up with a developing aesthetic controversy in China between thinkers advocating a position of beauty and form and others rebutting it with reality and ideology.

Neo-Expressionism, Appropriation, Neo-Geo, and before those movements, Pattern and Decoration, and before that, Minimalism and Post-minimalism, and before them, Body Art, Performance, Land Art, Concept Art and Colour Field Painting, and before all of those, Assemblage, Pop, Painterly Pre-Pop and Neo-Dada, and before them, Abstract Expressionism — none of these happened in the PRC. At least, not in the sense implied by the form of this list, where one thing relates to, or comes out of another

and the emerging thing being critical of the previous thing is a way of it being anything at all. What happened instead in China were tendencies, campaigns and movements, and link-ups between the studio and the political authorities, for which it is difficult to find equivalents in western experience. So much seems oddly out of time, on the one hand, and an innovative mix for which no artist in the West ever thought of asking, on the other.

Yu created a different kind of abstract painting to his Klee abstracts, with a repeating-circle format, starting in the mid-1980s. The layout of Yu's series comes from Mondrian's plus-and-minus compositions of the 1910s. Yu's poetic explanation of the circle series is that it expresses unity: it is a painterly exploration of cosmic harmony connected to Daoism. On a less spiritual level one could say that, as with Klee, but now with original means, the circle paintings have logic, structure and surprise. They offer variations on a visual metaphor for the effect of light in the real world.

To a westerner they don't seem provocative, because we know about Abstract Expressionism and its fall-out movements in painting. But the circle series had the opposite effect when first seen by the Chinese art world. In the PRC context of the mid-1980s where 'realist discourses' had been dominant for such a long period, and, as Gladston puts it, 'the anti-traditional iconoclasm of the Cultural Revolution persisted strongly in the public consciousness,' the circle series appeared to be *all* provocation. It evoked a kind of aesthetic, distanced, contemplative art associated in China with pre-revolutionary elitist society; alien, non-representational, non-colourful and secretive. If Yu is a legend now in Chinese art mythology, this was the legend's opening moment. It's not hard to imagine that perhaps provocation — audience response; ideas of art's reception — might have become in that mid-1980s moment perceivable. Sheer meaning: a fascinating content to be turned over and tested, using many approaches.

Yu became interested in Richard Hamilton and Andy Warhol at the end of the 1980s. Again, it might seem odd timing. Warhol died in 1986 but at a low point in his critical career. His current status as the central representative genius of postmodernism, its originating Giotto, was yet to be established when Yu started drawing on him. Hamilton's 1960s' Pop had developed into a complex and persuasive tendentious realism. But he, too — although, of course, still living — was no longer a particularly visible, influential or remarked-upon figure. What attracted Yu to these figures was their inspection and highlighting of 1960s, affluent western society. It provided models for him at this moment when China was beginning its own economic rise. Yu's Pop Maos often have red in them; there is no corresponding obviously dominant colour in Warhol's Mao series, of course: colour for Warhol is design-oriented, not symbolic. It's interesting to consider the present book's suggestion that Yu was responding belatedly but warmly to the Mao directive to artists to use red often in order to signify revolution, as well as to stand for optimism and happiness.

With Warhol, Mao is apolitical: a sign without a meaning. Politics becomes nothing but art. Yu's Mao is a smiling relative, the overweight cheery uncle, a figure of warmth relaxing in patterned interiors, garlanded with flowers, surrounded by happiness-inducing, sexy girls, a saviour and a friend. Eventually the series included a sub-group called A Pocket Western Art History About Mao – Foreign Maos, where masterpieces of western art become the setting for a Mao appearance. He is seen smiling in van Gogh's *Wheatfield with Crows* (1890). Western influence is acknowledged — as Deng sloganized when he first campaigned for his reforms: 'To Get Rich is Glorious!' West meets East and East embraces West but is still East — but what *is* East if it's no longer Mao?

Later, in the 1990s, he began painting landscape views of the Yimeng mountain region. The promotional language that has built up around contemporary Chinese art includes such meaningless but ubiquitous phrases as 'magnificent masterworks'. This was used with fervent sincerity in a review in *Frieze* of Yu's major retrospective in Beijing, in 2013. How does it work in relation to the landscapes? He took photos of the countryside and later created paintings based on them: this is the factual basis of these works. If 'magnificent' and 'masterly' are unsatisfactory, do the works, loose and cheerful as they are, amount to explorations of medium; interrogations of photography; philosophical enquiries into representation; denigrations of meaning in order to create new productive uncertainty? Perhaps all these possibilities are there. Just as Madame Blavatsky's interest in India's spirituality was a conversation that Kandinsky thought he could have, without it necessarily being more than a conversation in the background, one that could easily change. The paintings wouldn't lose anything.

It is surprisingly thrilling when it turns out Yu's justifications for the landscapes include his proposals that they might be uplifting, they are a relief from Duchampian trendiness and they transport you to a site of unspoiled beauty, far from corruption. What is the corrupt thing? Is it the art world, the government, international finances, modernization — and what will resist it — is it nostalgia for modernism, sincere painting, one's own local countryside paradise?

When he describes the meaning for him of the circle abstracts, which he still produces, picking up the threads again in 2007 having earlier left off the series, his language might cause a westerner to zone out because of its New Age tone: a soporific Grateful Dead feeling of everything connecting to everything. It goes against the quality of the series — which is not to do with generalized pleasantness but, rather, specific visual rhythms, a tough structural unity that varies from painting to painting. How does it connect to his sense of the significant Chineseness of the Yimeng Mountain series? He makes inescapably nationalistic claims for it. These strike a discordant note in relation to the progressive liberalism that characterizes other statements he has made. If there's a claim that rural authentic simplicity offers a feeling of essential rightness and goodness then it ought to be universal, otherwise there's something poisonous about it.

Back to the Maos: Warhol creates a mystery out of something that was largely meaningless to him anyway, but for Yu Mao means something, mostly good things. He's concerned to soften the badness of the bad things — from which he has personally suffered. Amelioration through patterns, sexy girls and flowers: and in the Foreign Maos of the 2000s, through association with marvellous highpoints of western art. We get the sense that he doesn't want to mask atrocity with fragrance but to attack and exorcise it. In all his painting series he creates socially engaged and passionate, sometimes intriguingly fudged, muffled and patch-worked, structures of metaphors for what really exists. (It exists but it's contradictory.)

Matthew Collings

Yu Youhan:
The (Dis-)placed Literatus in Revolutionary and Post-revolutionary China

Paul Gladston

'In the world today all culture, all literature and art belong to definite classes and are geared to definite political lines. There is in fact no such thing as art for art's sake, art that stands above classes, art that is detached from or independent of politics. Proletarian literature and art are part of the whole proletarian revolutionary cause; they are, as Lenin said, cogs and wheels in the whole revolutionary machine.'

Mao Zedong[1]

'I am a member of the masses, and I am an artist of the people.'

Yu Youhan[2]

YU YOUHAN 余友涵 IS ONE OF CHINA'S leading contemporary artists. He first came to international prominence during the early 1990s as a seminal contributor to the painterly genre known as 'Political Pop' (*Zhengzhi bopu*) — which is characterized by a bringing together of imagery representing the revolutionary era in China with aspects of western(ized) popular visual culture (fig. 1). International recognition of Yu's Political Pop paintings came about initially as a result of his participation in China's New Art, Post-1989 at the Hong Kong Arts Centre, Hong Kong, and China Avant-garde at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin (both 1993), the first major survey exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art to be held, which then toured outside the People's Republic of China. In the same year Yu exhibited at the 45th Venice Biennale — among the first group of contemporary artists from the PRC to do so — and the First Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Brisbane, Australia. Since 1997 Yu has been represented by ShanghArt, one of the most successful commercial galleries in the PRC. His paintings now sell consistently on the international art market for hundreds of thousands of US dollars.[3]

Before becoming known internationally for his contribution to Political Pop, Yu had already established a significant profile within avant-garde art circles in the PRC during the second half of the 1980s as a ground-breaking maker of abstract paintings combining forms translated from early and mid-twentieth-century European modernism with traditional Chinese approaches to image-making. Three of Yu's abstract paintings of the 1980s were included in the landmark survey exhibition China/Avant-garde, which was staged at the National Art Museum of China in February 1989. Since the end of the 1990s Yu has worked through a succession of styles, first abandoning Political Pop to produce a related series of expressionistic figurative paintings collectively titled Ah! Us!, and then embarking on a series of landscape paintings combining Chinese and western techniques and aesthetic sensibilities before returning to the abstract style he first developed during the 1980s. This return to abstraction has taken place alongside the production of a series incorporating images of Mao Zedong into parodies of iconic art works by western modernists and postmodernists titled A Pocket Western Art

Fig. 1

Yu Youhan. *Mao with Whitney*. 1989. Acrylic on canvas. 106 x 136 cm.

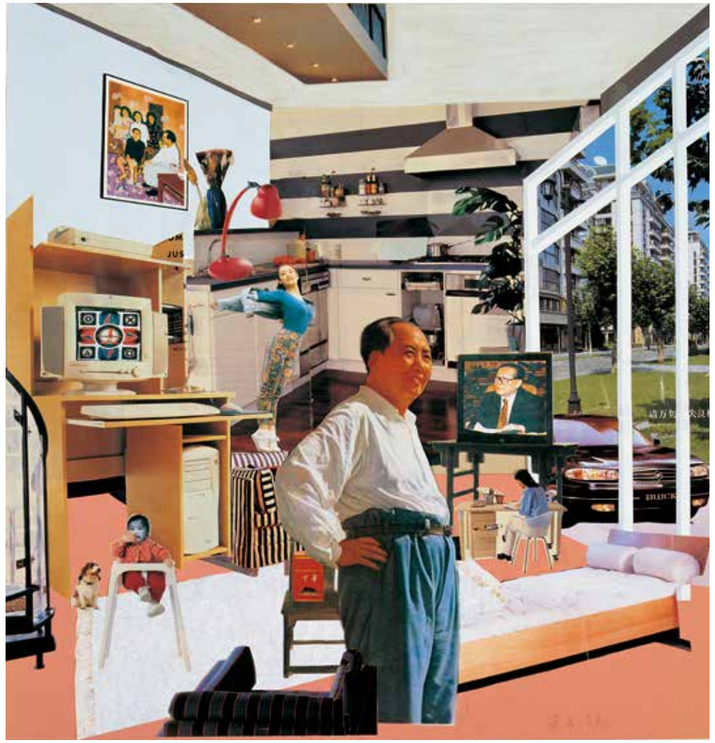


Fig. 2

Yu Youhan. *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* 2000. Collage. 47.5 x 46 cm.

History about Mao – Foreign Maos.

Yu's conspicuous stylistic pluralism and hybridizing of differing cultural outlooks and techniques is open to interpretation from the point of view of international art world discourses still inflected by thinking associated with poststructuralist postmodernism and postcolonialism as a contribution to the global expansion of a critically deconstructive 'post-West' contemporary art. Indeed, Yu's Political Pop paintings have been discussed in such terms both within and outside the PRC since the early 1990s.[4] However, as I shall argue here, this ultimately deterritorializing transnationalist view overlooks more complex, often contradictory relationships between Yu's paintings and the variable contexts of their production and reception within and outside the PRC.

Yu has acknowledged the direct impact of western modernist and postmodernist art on his practice as a painter. This includes that of the work of Paul Cézanne and Vincent van Gogh on landscape, portrait and still life paintings produced by Yu during the 1970s and early 1980s, Piet Mondrian's 'plus and minus' motifs of the early twentieth century on Yu's circular abstracts of the 1980s, and the work of Andy Warhol and Richard Hamilton on Yu's Political Pop paintings.[5] Yu's collage *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* (2000; fig. 2), for example, makes direct reference to Hamilton's similarly titled collage of 1956 (fig. 3).

Another painter whose work has ostensibly impacted on that of Yu is Gerhard Richter. The work of both artists is characterized by multiple styles including recurrent shifts between abstraction and figuration. Both have also produced landscape paintings combining differing stylistic approaches. In addition, Yu has, like Richter, appropriated imagery from popular visual culture as part of the production of what might be referred to as contemporary forms of history painting. In the case of Richter's early photorealist paintings of the 1960s and 1970s, there are discernible references to major European conflicts and traumatic events of the twentieth century as well as the emergence of western consumer culture after World War II. Yu's Political Pop paintings of the late 1980s and early 1990s make comparable references to China's Cultural Revolution and the development of westernized consumer culture in the PRC

Fig. 3

Richard Hamilton. *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* 1956. Collage. 26 x 24.8 cm. Courtesy of Kunsthalle Tübingen.

after the acceptance of Deng Xiaoping's so-called policy of Opening and Reform at the third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in December 1978. Acceptance of this policy secured Deng's leadership of the CCP over Mao Zedong's designated successor Hua Guofeng, as well as initiating the PRC's centrally driven — and throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s increasingly prodigious — post-revolutionary socio-economic transformation. It also resulted indirectly in a departure from the extremely close relationship between cultural production and politics that dominated the Maoist period after the founding of communist New China in 1949. Deng's policy of Opening and Reform was in actuality a range of related policies and directives, including the 'Four Modernizations', the 'Liberate Your Thinking and Search for the Truth in the Facts' directive, and the 'Two Hundreds' directive. The combination of these policies and directives was intended to bring about a significant liberalization of thinking and practice in the PRC that would allow for the formal rehabilitation of intellectuals and the opening up of space for entrepreneurial activity outside the previously pervasive ideological reach of the CCP.

Yu readily admits to knowledge of Richter's work. However, he attributes the stylistic plurality of his own painting not to the direct impact of Richter's, but instead to a tendency within indigenous Chinese culture towards shifting aesthetic viewpoints. Yu illustrates this point with reference to traditional Chinese landscape garden design, which, he contends, opens up constantly changing perspectives as the viewer 'moves through the space' in contrast to an emphasis on the 'totality of the garden' in western landscape garden design.[6] This understanding of differences between western and Chinese landscape garden design echoes similar ideas put forward by the British architect and Sinophile Sir William Chambers in the early eighteenth century. In his *Dissertation on Oriental Gardening* (1720) Chambers, who had travelled to China, envisions the Chinese garden as a site of unfolding aesthetic experiences in contrast to the Neoclassical style of his near contemporary, Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, who constructed gardens comprising separate, carefully premeditated picturesque vistas of an otherwise aesthetically unified space.

Although Yu rejects any direct impact of Richter's work, stylistic or otherwise, upon his own, it is nevertheless tempting to interpret both in similar if not identical theoretical terms. In the context of westernized cultural discourses, Richter is widely regarded as a major exponent of artistic postmodernism. Richter's status as an exemplary postmodernist rests on a combination of factors. Although Richter has for the most part used traditional painterly techniques in the production of his figurative works, he also makes conspicuous use of imagery appropriated from photographic sources, including from postcards, press cuttings and found photographs (fig. 4) — a usage further signalled by quasi-mechanical blurrings of the painterly-photographic image, which compromises any sense of indexical authority or authenticity attached to the paintings in question. As early as 1964-65 Richter commented that he chose to blur his photorealist paintings 'so that they do not look artistic or craftsmanlike but technological, smooth and perfect'.[7] This appropriation from photographic sources and blurring of images imparts to Richter's figurative paintings qualities of defamiliarization and dislocation more usually associated with collage-montage. As a result, the significances of Richter's chosen imagery, including its precise sources and points of reference, are — in the general viewing context of the gallery space at least — rendered profoundly indeterminate.

Uncertainty extends, in addition, to Richter's chosen painterly techniques. As a further consequence of Richter's appropriation of images from photographic sources, any sense of aura — that is to say, of authoritative ontological presence in time and space — that might be conventionally attached to his painting is, along lines described by Walter Benjamin in his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936), also effectively suspended.[8] As Peter Osborne has indicated, Richter's early development as a visual artist during the 1950s and 1960s takes place in the context of a continuing sense of crisis with regard to the sustainability of traditional painterly techniques within western(ized) cultural contexts after the invention of photography and the proliferation of other forms of mechanical reproduction from the early nineteenth century onwards.[9] In relation to dominant Greenbergian high modernist discourses of the 1950s and early 1960s, the continuity of painting as a critically relevant medium is predicated on constant reflexive

Fig. 4

Gerhard Richter. *Group of People*. 1965. Oil on canvas. 170 x 200 cm. Courtesy of Atelier Richter, Cologne.

Fig. 5

Gerhard Richter. *Abstract Painting*. 1980. Oil on canvas. 65 x 80 cm. Courtesy of Atelier Richter, Cologne.

innovation within the specialist limits of painterly practice.[10] This stricture resulted, however, not only in an extreme, formalist purging of painting's representational and referential function — as evidenced by the radically minimal 'year zero' paintings of Ad Reinhardt[11] among others — but also an eventual abandoning of painting for minimalist objecthood[12] and conceptualism.

Also emerging at this time were attitudes and techniques that would later come to be associated with the shift towards artistic postmodernism. From an emerging postmodernist perspective, the extreme formalism of high modernist abstraction in addition to the pronounced masculinism and western-centrism of associated Greenbergian discourses rendered it singularly inappropriate as a continuing locus of criticality in relation to a rapidly changing, increasingly decentred and pluralistic post-war world. In place of abstract painting, artists critical of high modernism returned to defamiliarization techniques initially developed by the historical avant-gardes of the early twentieth century, as well as new media such as performance and film. They also sought to address and to some extent compete with capitalism's spectacular fetishizing of commodities, which, as Peter Fischer indicates, consequently 'spilled over into works of art'.[13] Richter's stubborn adherence to the traditional practice of painting in conjunction with the use of defamiliarization techniques involving appropriations of aspects of capitalist spectacle can therefore be viewed, as Osborne has argued, as an attempt to sustain the possibility of the former while acknowledging the placing of its conventional auratic authority, so to speak, 'sous-rature' (under erasure) by the latter.

The desire to persist with painting as a critically valid form of visual expression while at the same time accepting the suspension of its conventional auratic authority, also extends to Richter's abstract works (fig. 5). Throughout his career Richter has shuttled continually between figurative and abstract styles of painting. Moreover, he has not only adopted a variety of abstract styles, ranging from the ostensibly expressionistic to the coolly minimal, but also combined abstraction with figuration. While Richter's 'purely' abstract paintings are in some sense recognizably his own, they are as a series characterized by conspicuous appropriations of existing stylistic approaches. Moreover, Richter deploys a variety of techniques, including the use of printmaking squeegees that, in a manner similar to the blurring of his figurative paintings, serve to compromise the indexical authenticity and authority of the painterly gesture. Richter's abstractions are therefore, like his figurative paintings, also placed under an implied chiasmus. His combination of abstraction with figuration serves a similar purpose with regard to both styles.

The combination of these intersecting technical and stylistic factors make it possible to interpret Richter's paintings in characteristically poststructuralist postmodernist terms as forms of deconstructivist pastiche[14] or allegory[15] — that is to say, counter-authoritative recontextualizations and remotivations of meaning through stylistic imitation or the presentation of texts with both manifest and latent significances. By the same token, Richter's appropriation of existing photographic images may be viewed as a knowingly deconstructivist variation on the pairing collage-montage — in a widened technical sense — whereby the authoritative status of familiar meanings associated with those images is suspended as an outcome of their recontextualization and remotivation.[16] Both of which, to borrow from Donald Preziosi, are arguably akin to the 'situation of the child discovering the fallibility of its parents and remaining committed to loving and caring for them whilst learning to comprehend, to think through and with, their contradictory behaviours.'[17]

By extension, the authorities of the wider economies of political meaning to which Richter's figurative paintings refer — namely, the competing socialist and capitalist ideologies that strongly characterized the Cold War and that have, in trace form at least, continued to inform international East-West realpolitik after the fall of the Berlin Wall — are also placed in question. As well as seeking to perpetuate the practice of painting in the face of the anti-auratic effects of mechanical reproduction, competing commodity fetishization and the challenge posed by postmodernist defamiliarization techniques, Richter may therefore also be understood to have instigated a thoroughgoing critique of ideologically inflected representation in a manner that witnesses the deconstruction of any simple reductive opposition between differing polarized political perspectives.

In the context of post-World War II Germany before 1989, where Cold War confrontation between Marxism-Leninism and capitalism inscribed itself directly on the European landscape through the Iron Curtain's geo-political division of East and West, this witnessing was insistently material rather than notional in its implications. Richter had himself migrated from the GDR to the FRG in 1961 to pursue a career as a painter under relatively liberal socio-political conditions, after growing up and studying in communist East Germany during the immediate aftermath of World War II. In the context of ideologically differing neo-liberal and post-socialist takes on an increasingly global market capitalism after 1989, those material implications arguably remain in place, albeit — as Richter's early figurative paintings predict — in a less obviously pronounced, deconstructively flattened form.

In recent years, poststructuralist postmodernism and its variation postcolonialism have been brought into question both as a result of a resurgence of neo-materialist/realist discourses associated with the writings of Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière and Slavoj Žižek, and reassertions of cultural essentialism encompassed by emerging debates related to the term 'contemporaneity'. Seen from the perspective of neo-materialist/realist discourses, poststructuralist postmodernism is viewed not only as lacking in necessary political decisiveness in response to evident — indeed, after the onset of the global financial crisis in 2008, conspicuously widening — social inequalities, but in addition as effectively complicit with neo-liberalism, which itself can be understood to assert authority not through rationalist clarity but the proliferation of deconstructivist uncertainty.[18]

In the case of emerging debates associated with contemporaneity, legitimacy has been extended to instances of cultural exceptionalism that seek to resist what might be seen as the latent imperialism of poststructuralist postmodernism's effectively universalizing conception of the inherent uncertainties of linguistic signification.[19] In some cases such instances of cultural exceptionalism diverge from the poststructuralist-nuanced strategically resistant essentialisms advocated by, among others, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Paul Gilroy to present what are conspicuously uncompromising assertions of categorical cultural difference.[20] This is very much evident in relation to indigenous readings of contemporary Chinese art within the PRC where dominant discourses have, since the rise of an officially sanctioned

neo-Confucianism in the mid-1990s[21], become increasingly — indeed, in some cases, uncompromisingly — nationalistic[22]; a discursive repositioning that effectively reprises by other conceptual means the vehement anti-imperialism of the time of the Cultural Revolution in the PRC.

Related to these criticisms, within the international art world there has since the 1990s been an increasingly widely held perception of failure on the part of artistic postmodernism to engage critically with society beyond the limits of conventional sites of display. This has resulted in a proliferation of supposedly socially-engaged modes of artistic production sometimes associated with Nicolas Bourriaud's coining of the term 'relational aesthetics'[23] alongside the development of modes of curatorial practice that seek in various ways to interact directly and in a critically transformational way with society. These supposedly socially engaged modes of artistic and curatorial practice include explicitly post-Duchampian critical approaches, such as that adopted by the 'readymade artist' Claire Fontaine, which claims an 'ongoing interrogation of the political impotence and the crisis of singularity that seem to define contemporary

Fig. 6

Wang Guangyi. *Great Criticism – Coca Cola*. 1993. Oil on canvas. 200 x 200 cm. Courtesy of Wang Guangyi.

art today' through 'collective protocols of production, détournements, and the production of various devices for the sharing of intellectual and private property'.[24]

Richter's adherence to conventional museum- and gallery-oriented painterly practice — albeit in a deconstructively modified form — nevertheless continues to be regarded by many in the international art world as a significant contribution to the development of art after high modernism.[25] This is signalled in part by the high monetary value conferred on Richter's work by the international art market. However, it can also be ascribed to the ineluctable relationship between Richter's painting and the wider socio-political, economic and cultural contexts of its making. While Richter's painting could not be described convincingly as either 'relational' or 'socially engaged' in the currently modish senses of those terms, it does, though, continue to reference what postmodernist, neo-materialist and relational discourses have jointly identified, *contra* western Greenbergian high modernism, as a necessary dependency of artistic criticality on socio-historical context. Richter's painting therefore retains a degree of credibility as a perceived locus of critical intervention on wider socio-political and economic issues despite now unfashionable associations with artistic postmodernism.

Given the evident formal and technical similarities between Richter's work and that of Yu, there would appear to be substantive grounds for viewing both in comparable poststructuralist postmodernist theoretical terms. Such a reading is undeniably persuasive, not only on stylistic and technical grounds but also in light of the inescapable tensions between capitalist and communist ideologies that inform the significances of both. Further support for a poststructuralist postmodernist reading of Yu's work may be drawn from an attention to the work of other Chinese contemporary artists whose mature practice was, like Yu's, established during the 1980s and 1990s. Consider here, for example, the Great Criticism series of paintings (fig. 6) by the now internationally renowned artist and co-contributor to the genre of Political Pop, Wang Guangyi, which throughout juxtaposes aspects of Maoist and capitalist spectacle in what might be described as mutually assured acts of deconstruction. By extension, it is also possible to view Yu's work in relation to postcolonialist discourses as a 'peripheral' reworking of western idioms in culturally hybrid form, which, in light of Homi Bhabha's conception of language as 'Third Space', can be understood to deconstruct asymmetrical West-East relations of dominance associated with western colonialism-imperialism.[26]

In spite of ostensible similarities between Richter's work and that of Yu, I intend to demonstrate here that a comparative reading such as that outlined above overlooks countervailing significances demonstrated by a granular attention to the relationships between Yu's work and the localized circumstances of its production and reception within the PRC. In doing so I do not, however, wish to deny outright the relevance of a poststructuralist attention to Yu's work by erecting a diametrically opposed vision of its rootedness in some sort of essential Chineseness in a manner commensurate with the starkly defined cultural exceptionalisms of emerging discourses related to contemporaneity.

Although I start from the notion that cultural texts signify differently in relation to differing discursive contexts and socio-economic developmental trajectories, I reject the contention put forward as part of debates associated with contemporaneity

that discursive differentiation of meaning justifies a rigid multi-dimensional mapping of entirely separate, spatially located cultural outlooks. Instead, I persist in upholding discursive differentiation of meaning in light of poststructuralist theory and practice as a seedbed of illimitable spatio-temporal polysemy problematizing any sense of definitive or authoritative cultural meaning and/or location. As such, this approach is intended to play productively as well as negatively — that is to say, deconstructively — across the perceived boundary between essentialist and established poststructuralist perspectives. To which extent it may be thought of as an attempt to arrive at a provisionally 'grounded' theorization of Yu's work proceeding from a sense of the inadequacy of both of those existing theoretical models as sole means of explaining the totality of cultural significances; as numerous commentators including Spivak have indicated, a rigorous attention to deconstructive theory and practice in any case always-already carries with it the possibility of its own deconstruction.[27]

Furthermore, this provisionally 'grounded' approach is intended as a rejoinder to persistent materialist and essentialist concerns regarding the formalist detachment of poststructuralism from an attention to socio-political and economic circumstances. As the literary critic Terry Eagleton has indicated, while deconstruction can be used somewhat absurdly to 'deny the existence of relatively determinate truths, meanings, identities, intentions, [and] historical continuities', it also has the potential to act as a 'political' means of dismantling 'the logic by which a particular system of thought, and behind that a whole system of political structures and social institutions, maintains its force', and, thereby, of revealing how presently signified meanings operate as 'effects of a wider and deeper history — of language, of the unconscious, of social institutions and practices'. In other words, it is possible to think of deconstruction not just as a means of persistently negating the authoritative significance of established meanings, but also of developing counter-narratives that pay close analytical attention to the unfolding complexity and mutability of historical meanings set against the backcloth of changing material and discursive conditions.[28]

This book, the first scholarly monograph on the work of Yu Youhan, draws on primary documents, first-hand interviews and secondary sources, including a personal archive of papers compiled by the artist. Conversations held directly between Yu and the author were conducted in Shanghai on 7 March 2009 and 24 November 2014. The present text also makes reference to a series of interviews with Yu conducted under the auspices of the ShanghArt Gallery in 2012 and 2013. English language transcripts of this latter series of interviews were provided to the present author before their subsequent publication in the catalogue accompanying Yu's first one-person exhibition in Beijing, which was staged at the Yuan Space gallery between 23 June and 7 September 2013.[29] Direct conversations held between Yu and the author were conducted in English and Mandarin Chinese with the assistance of a native-speaking Chinese interpreter. These were recorded digitally before being translated and transcribed into English and Mandarin Chinese. An English language text of the conversation conducted with Yu in 2009 is included in the book *Contemporary Art in Shanghai: Conversations with Seven Chinese Artists* (2011)[30]. A version of the same conversation in Mandarin Chinese was published in the magazine *Artworld* (*Yishu shijie*) in 2009.[31]

One of the methodological challenges presented by the use of interviews as a means of gathering and presenting data is that of 'reconstructive memory' — that is to say, the reframing of past events in relation to, among other things, individual perceptions, imagination, semantic memory and cultural beliefs. As the cognitive psychologist Frederick Bartlett argued as early as the 1930s, subjective factors of this sort support a misplaced sense of the coherence and stability of memory. Such thinking may be extended to psychoanalytic theory and in particular Jacques Lacan's writings on the tension between a narcissistic sense of the coherence of the self — as described in relation to the Lacanian notion of the 'mirror stage' — and the shifting and fragmentary status of subjectivity inscribed in language.[32] Reconstructive memory may also involve a conscious or unconscious desire on the part of interviewees to present their past actions and, perhaps, those of others in a particular light. Moreover, there is a tendency on the part of those being interviewed, often referred to as the 'interview effect', to supply answers in accordance with the perceived desires and preconceptions of the interviewer. It is therefore necessary to maintain continual scepticism with regard to the absolute veracity of the responses given by interviewees.

Within the particular context of the PRC, where there are significant governmental restrictions on freedom of speech and action, it is important to recognize that artists speaking 'on the record' may choose consciously or unconsciously to temper their accounts for fear of official sanctions and, perhaps, to cover the tracks of their own previous political indiscretions. It is also important in this regard to take account of differences in socio-cultural outlook between interviewees, interviewers and attendant translators. In any interview between a 'western' interviewer and 'Chinese' interviewee both 'sides' speak in ways that are informed by their relationship to locally dominant socio-political and cultural discourses as well as the persistence of colonialist-imperialist relations of dominance. In supposedly liberal western(ized) contexts this means, for example, pressure to conform, amongst other things, to dominant discursive limitations on speech imposed over the last quarter of a century and more by the politics of identity and associated forms of political correctness; limitations that demand a consistent abjuration of cultural essentialism and, perhaps more significantly, an often simplistic upholding of notions of cultural plurality and hybridity. By contrast, within the politically authoritarian context of the PRC, alongside a lived understanding of localized socio-cultural and political conditions, there are dominant discursive restrictions on any public statement or action that might be deemed to undermine the authority of the Chinese government, the integrity of the Chinese nation-state and any associated sense of Chinese civilization-specific identity. Consequently, there is often within the PRC an understandable resistance to and misapprehension of western(ized) discursive positionings and related lines of questioning. This observation may, of course, be reversed to encompass outside resistances to and misapprehensions of dominant discourses within the PRC. The intersection of these differing discursive outlooks leads almost inescapably to failures of communication — partial and outright — aporias of speech, evasions, obfuscations, ellipses, mystifications and talking at cross-purposes. Again, it is necessary to maintain continual scepticism

with regard to the absolute veracity of responses given. It is also necessary to accept cultural limitations on questions asked, responses given and the reception of responses.

No amount of careful attention to signified meanings, editing or footnoting will ever fully negate slippages of understanding that take place as a result of the translation from one cultural-linguistic context to another. Not only is cultural-linguistic translation subject to problematic absences of conceptual and idiomatic equivalence between differing language systems, but, as poststructuralist accounts of linguistic signification have shown,[33] linguistic utterances and other acts of signification are also subject to the continual possibility of deconstructive re-motivation as a result of changed circumstances of time and place in a manner analogous to the dislocating effects of the western historical- and neo-avant-garde's artistic use of collage-montage.

Consequently, interview transcripts should be thought of not as objective representations but as linguistic constructs whose meaning remains open to continual re-motivation through transformative acts of translation and (re-)reading. The interviews under discussion here can therefore be understood to share in the conspicuously uncertain significances of the contemporary artworks upon which they, in part, reflect, which are themselves — as assemblages of the traces of Chinese and non-Chinese cultural elements — both products of and subject to the refractive effects of cultural translation. By extension, the same could be said of readings and translations of other related sources. This book is thus open to interpretation by turns as a work of scholarship and as something akin to a critically mimetic work of art. Indeed, both are intended significances.

To mitigate the effects of these problematizing factors from a scholarly point of view, much care was taken to triangulate what was said by Yu with information gleaned from other primary and secondary sources. Furthermore, Yu was invited to respond to follow-up questions both as a means of clarifying initially vague responses and, where possible, to resolve and explain discrepancies between his accounts and those contained in secondary documentary sources.

This book is divided into four sections. The first three adopt a biographical form of narrative to discuss the development of Yu's paintings in relation to the immediate and wider socio-political, economic and cultural circumstances of their making. Section one encompasses the period from Yu's birth in 1943 to his graduation from the Beijing Academy of Arts and Crafts in 1973; section two, the period from 1973, when Yu began his career as an art teacher in Shanghai, to 2002; and section three, from 2002 to the present. What emerges is a detailed view of Yu's negotiation and renegotiation of his practice as a painter in the face of changing material and discursive conditions within the PRC including the impact there of western(ized) modernity and globalization. The final section builds on the first three to present a provisional theoretical analysis of Yu's painting, critically addressing contrasting international and localized views of the significance of contemporary Chinese art.[34]

Fig. 7

Photographer unknown. Yu Youhan and his mother. c.1943-1944. Courtesy of the artist.

Formative Development

YU YOUHAN WAS BORN IN SHANGHAI ON 9 July 1943 (fig. 7), before the ending of the second Sino-Japanese War in September 1945 — so named because of the Sino-Japanese war of 1894-95 — and the founding of the communist People's Republic of China on 1 October 1949. His life therefore encompasses the entirety of China's Maoist era and that of the country's so-called post-socialist reforms.

Yu was born into a professionalized, relatively wealthy middle-class family. His earliest memories include a train journey to Nanjing, accompanied by his mother, sometime in 1947 or 1948 during which, Yu recalls a moving train hitting and killing a man dressed in worker's clothing. Those same memories also include recollections of a rickshaw ride with his father from Route Doumer (present day Donghu Road) to the gates of Ravinel Park, (today's Xiangyang Park) in Shanghai, sometime during the early spring of 1949. At the gates of the park Yu remembers street vendors selling toy windmills and republican flags associated with China's then ruling Kuomintang (KMT) party. He also remembers his father questioning how long the flags would remain on sale in the face of an impending occupation of Shanghai by the advancing forces of the communist People's Liberation Army (PLA). Yu remembers in addition the shelling of Shanghai a few days before the seizing of the city by the PLA on 26 May 1949.

During the late 1940s, Yu's father worked as an official of the Jing Chen Bank in Shanghai. Shortly after the capture of Shanghai by the PLA the bank relocated to British-controlled Hong Kong. Yu's father chose to remain in Shanghai because of his wife's schizophrenia, which had manifested itself earlier during the 1940s. Yu's father was consequently made redundant. After May 1949, Yu's family quickly became impoverished relative to their former financial position. Yu's father used redundancy money from the Jing Chen Bank to start a private business. However, because of newly established government restrictions on private enterprise, the family had to rely heavily for much of its income on the pawning of private possessions and the renting out of rooms in their home.

At the beginning of the 1950s Yu's mother's schizophrenia worsened, resulting in acts of domestic violence directed towards Yu's father. As a result, Yu and his older sister were sent for a time to live with an aunt in Nanshi, a district of Shanghai near to the

Huangpu River. Yu's sister was subsequently sent to live with the aunt's husband's brother. Yu saw very little of his elder sister for the next three years. Yu became a pupil at the Penglai District no. 2 Primary School in Nanshi in 1950, remaining there until 1956. While in Nanshi, Yu witnessed the early suppression of supposed anti-revolutionary elements in the PRC. These included the denunciation of his aunt's husband as well as the family of one of his primary school classmates. Yu's mother was confined to a psychiatric hospital in Minhang from the early 1950s until 1958.

While at primary school Yu reportedly became a model student, receiving awards for academic excellence and becoming head of the Communist Youth League. At this time Yu recollects making chalk drawings of MiG-15 fighter jets attacking US forces as part of China's then involvement in the Korean War of 1950-53. From third grade onwards Yu was taught painting by a professional art teacher, Mr. Tan, who maintained a small studio at the school. Mr. Tan, who was trained in western oil painting and drawing techniques, encouraged Yu to develop his drawing skills, but with relatively little in the way of structured teaching. In 1955 an exhibition of Soviet economic and cultural achievement was held as the inaugural event at the newly opened Sino-Soviet Friendship Building on Nanjing Road in Shanghai. Urged on by Mr. Tan, Yu made sketches of portrait busts of the writers Maxim Gorky and Vladimir Mayakovsky by the sculptor Sergei Konenkov. Soon afterwards Mr. Tan encouraged Yu to apply for the attached high school of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, one of the most prestigious art academies in China at the time. Yu's application was unsuccessful, almost certainly because his training did not conform to the then institutionally dominant Soviet Chistiakov system, which required a highly structured academic approach to drawing. Yu attended middle school in Shanghai from 1956 to 1959.

Shortly after coming to power in 1949, the CCP handed down directives on artistic production within the newly founded PRC. These directives, which were impacted strongly upon by the cultural policies of the Soviet Union, as well as views put forward by Chinese Marxists and socialists as part of China's New Culture and May Fourth movements in the aftermath of World War I, built on ideas first put forward by Mao Zedong as part of his 'Yan'an Talks on Art and Literature' of 1942, in which Mao followed Lenin's envisioning of art as part of a larger 'revolutionary machine'. Under the CCP's direction all artists working in the PRC were not only required to take the view of the masses, but also to uphold the revolutionary aims of the Party. The CCP's policy on artistic production in the newly founded PRC was introduced at the first National Congress of Literature and Art Workers in Beijing in July 1949. In 1951, an initial period of CCP tolerance for bourgeois art came to an end. This resulted in a vigorous programme of political re-education involving the denunciation of teachers. In 1955, the CCP held a meeting at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing at which academics from twenty-two art schools were made to join a movement aimed at denouncing open criticism of the Party's position on the arts.

After returning to his family home in Shanghai, Yu befriended the son of a near neighbour, Fan Elun, whose family had been forcibly relocated following the sequestering of their French-style colonial-era home on present-day Huaihai Road in Shanghai for use by the PLA. Elun's father, Fan Jiman, then in his fifties, was a professor at the Shanghai Theatre Academy, founder of the Beethoven Bookshop sited opposite the Cathay Cinema on Huaihai Road and a friend of well-known artists such as Lin Fengmian and Liu Haisu. The Fans were a relatively well-to-do and highly cultured family. Yu recalls visiting their home and seeing Fauvist-style paintings by Fan Jiman as well as illustrated books and catalogues on western modernist art of the early twentieth century. These paintings, books and catalogues as well as the example set by Elun, who was an intellectual and a talented painter and draughtsman in his own right, were to have a significant impact on Yu's development as an artist. Fan Jiman's exposure to western modernism and his competence in western modernist painting and drawing techniques almost certainly came about in the context of China's openness to the impact of western culture on its own during the years prior to the onset of the second Sino-Japanese War, during which the cities of Shanghai and Hangzhou became centres for westernized art education[35] as well as sites of the production of westernized avant-garde art and the coalescing of avant-garde art groups such as the Storm Society (*Juelanshe*).[36] In 1955 — presumably as a consequence of the hardening of CCP attitudes to art education during that year — Fan Jiman was arrested and imprisoned as a rightist. He was not released until the 1980s.

In 1959 Yu enrolled at the Shanghai Shixi High School, close to the Jing'an Temple on present-day Nanjing Road in Shanghai. In 1961, at the end of his second year in high school, Yu became a part-time volunteer soldier. After graduating from high school, Yu joined the military full time, serving in the telephone section of the Communication Battalion of the Twelfth Army in the Ground Force of the PLA between August 1961 and January 1965. While serving as a full-time member of the PLA, Yu continued to develop his drawing skills, making sketches of his fellow soldiers. Yu was also supplied by post with Soviet art magazines sent by his friend Elun. Sometimes slipped between the pages of the magazines were reproductions of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century European paintings and drawings, including depictions of the female nude. Yu does not recall any attempts to suppress his drawing activities or interest in western art during his time in the PLA. Yu's self-professed reason for not seeking exemption from what was then compulsory military service — as many others of his social class did — was a sense of duty to the PRC. However, it should be noted that military service provided a way for those from bourgeois family backgrounds to habilitate themselves with a state actively opposed to groups and individuals of perceived anti-revolutionary standing.

In July 1965 Yu passed the national university entrance examination and was subsequently enrolled as a student of artistic design at the Central Academy of Arts and Crafts in Beijing — later the Academy of Art and Design within Tsinghua University. By the time of his enrolment at the Central Academy in September 1965, Yu had already become a technically competent draughtsman as well as knowledgeable about the development of historical and early modernist western art. Contrary to the notion of a monolithic Socialist Realism in the PRC of the 1950s and early 1960s, Yu was able to pursue a subjectivist approach to drawing both because of the durable traces of an early twentieth-century modernist visual culture within bourgeois circles in Shanghai after 1949 and what was presumably the inability of members of public bodies, such as the military, to distinguish that approach from Soviet-style realism.

By contrast, Yu's friend Elun was, because of the denunciation and imprisonment of his father, barred from

entry into formal higher education. He instead joined what Yu describes as a 'social youth group' — a euphemism perhaps for the revolutionary faction known as the Red Guards active during the Cultural Revolution — where he was educated informally in visual art and music. The Cultural Revolution was a period of widespread political, cultural and social upheaval that took place within the PRC between 1966 and Mao Zedong's death in 1976. The active phase of the Cultural Revolution extended from 1966 to 1971, but events within the PRC between 1971 and 1976 are generally considered to be a part.

During the early years of the Cultural Revolution, between 1966 and 1968, young leftist revolutionaries known as Red Guards mounted attacks on individuals, groups and institutions within the PRC that were perceived to be in opposition to established Maoist principles. In doing so, the Red Guards operated, with Mao's approval, outside the CCP's institutionalized bureaucratic system. Shortly after the coming together of the Red Guards in 1966, young revolutionary activists within the PRC began to divide into different factions with 'radical' Red Guards adopting an uncompromisingly critical attitude towards established power short of that of Mao himself, and 'rebels' who attempted to protect Party structures from direct attack. This lead to violent confrontation between radical and rebel groups until Mao intervened to disband the latter in 1967, giving radicals, for a time, free rein to pursue their revolutionary aims. Following intervention by the PLA, and with Mao's eventual agreement, the Red Guards were disbanded in 1969 in order to curb the extreme civil disorder that had ensued as a result of their actions. Elun entered higher education after the formal ending of the Cultural Revolution in 1977, eventually gaining a PhD.

In his first year at the Central Academy from the autumn of 1965 to the summer of 1966 (fig. 8), Yu studied techniques used in the production of Chinese porcelain. These techniques included the decoration and three-dimensional construction of ceramic objects. After formal lectures in the morning, Yu's class would visit the porcelain hall of the Forbidden City to study historical examples at first hand. This first year of study at the Central Academy inspired in Yu what would become a lifelong interest in traditional Chinese aesthetics and in particular the notion of a spontaneous interaction between opposing qualities including

Fig. 8

Photographer unknown. Yu Youhan. 1966.
Courtesy of the artist.

formal perfection and imperfection.[37] At this time Yu also made his first paintings in oil.

The standard duration of undergraduate study at the Central Academy before 1966 was five years. However, with the onset of the Cultural Revolution and a consequent suspension of any structured teaching, undergraduate study for Yu's year group was effectively extended by another three years. In actuality only the first year of Yu's time at the Central Academy involved formal tuition. After the official notice announcing the beginning of the Cultural Revolution issued on 16 May 1966, Yu's formal studies were replaced in part by group expeditions to rural China, a practice first proposed by radical thinkers in China, including the poet Lu Xun, during the early years of the twentieth century, as a way of focusing art, design and craft students on the realities of working life.[38] In 1966, notionally the second year of his studies at the Central Academy, Yu travelled to Guangdong province. He also planned but never embarked on a visit to Shao Shan, Mao's hometown.

After the issuing of the notice announcing the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, class conflict became an integral part of student life in the PRC. In June 1966 Yu was the target of two anonymous *dazibao* — literally 'big character posters' — denouncing him in non-specific terms as a supporter of bourgeois republicanism. *Dazibao* are handwritten, wall-mounted posters with large-scale Chinese characters used historically in China as a form of public communication and protest. In modern times, *dazibao* have been supplemented by fragments of text taken from newspapers, as well as printed reports and photographic images. During the Cultural Revolution they were produced as a means of communicating political directives and of denouncing individuals and groups perceived to be in opposition to established Maoist thinking. *Dazibao* were also used as a means of public protest during the Democracy Wall Movement of the late 1970s in the PRC. Yu was never labelled definitively nor subjected to formal rectification as an anti-revolutionary. However, for the next seven years until his formal graduation in 1973, when the accusations against him were publicly rescinded by the secretary of the Central Academy's Youth League, Yu remained under suspicion and, as a result, along with others, given the status of an 'unclassified' student.

Yu's denunciation took place within a context where the majority of his fellow students came from peasant and proletarian backgrounds. As a perceived member of the capitalist class Yu was a primary target for anonymous criticism, despite his having become a member of the Central Academy's branch of the Communist Youth League in March 1966. Yu was also criticized by teachers and fellow students for what was perceived as an unprofessional dedication to oil painting, which he practised fervently during his spare time. Before the onset of the Cultural Revolution the PRC was already riven by a climate of extreme political irrationality and paranoia. This included fears of an imperialist US invasion of the PRC stirred up by an official CCP campaign in 1965. Yu's public questioning of the likeliness of such an event, given the US's existing involvement in Vietnam, against the grain of popular thinking, may well have contributed to his subsequent denunciation. Following oblique warnings from his teachers that his aesthetic tastes were incompatible with those of the revolutionary masses, Yu made an understandably pragmatic decision to abandon any reading of foreign publications on art for the remainder of his studies.

As a consequence of his denunciation,

Yu became subject to persistent stress and depression despite advice from fellow students that his status would eventually be determined favourably by an objective assessment of the facts of his case. During a visit to rural Guangdong in 1966, Yu contracted hepatitis. Consequently, he was admitted to the Beijing Hospital for Infectious Diseases, where he underwent treatment for nearly one month. After helping to extinguish a fire in a wood factory adjacent to his university, Yu became ill once more. Persistent symptoms of pain and fatigue forced Yu to return to Shanghai where he spent time recuperating until October 1967. Yu also returned to Shanghai to recuperate during the spring and summer of the following year. Back in Beijing, Yu became involved in labour education activities. He subsequently contracted palindromic hepatitis — a severe cyclical form of the disease — which manifested itself on two occasions over a period of almost a year before his eventual recovery in 1973.

Post-Impressionism, Early Abstracts, Political Pop

YU GRADUATED FROM THE CENTRAL ACADEMY in 1973 with an abiding sense that his time there had for the most part been wasted. After his graduation, the Military Department of the Central Academy sent Yu to the village of Li in Shijiazhuang district close to Shanghai, where during the summer of 1973 he was assigned to work as a teacher at the Shanghai School of Arts and Crafts. Yu spent the remainder of the 1970s within the relatively undemanding context of the Shanghai School — an institution equivalent in status to a technical school — recuperating from the effects of his hepatic illness and post-traumatic stress suffered as a result of his denunciation, teaching and further developing his drawing and painting skills. As part of a continuing process of self-education, Yu drew from plaster casts of western classical sculptures held by the Shanghai School and studied the work of European impressionist and post-impressionist painters, including Cézanne and van Gogh, in reproduction. Even now Yu continues to regard late nineteenth-century European post-impressionist painting as the zenith of the West's visual artistic achievements. Yu also taught himself calligraphy by copying the works of recognized Chinese masters, such as Wu Changshou, in addition to studying classical Chinese sculpture and painting. During the same period Yu married and fathered a son.

Autodidacticism is characteristic of the development of many of the PRC's first wave of contemporary artists. Most members of the Stars group (*Xingxing*) — credited as the initiators of contemporary art in the PRC as a consequence of the closure of an unofficial open-air exhibition of their work by police and the staging of a march through Beijing in open protest to that closure in 1979 — were, for example, wholly or partly self-taught. Self-teaching was not only a necessity resulting from the suspension of formal art and design education in the PRC during the Cultural Revolution, it was also cultivated self-consciously into the 1970s and early 1980s as a means of distancing artistic practice from constraints on freedom of self-expression imposed by officially accepted forms of Socialist Realism. The so-called 'avant-garde' (*qianwei*) art that emerged into public view in the PRC at the end of the 1970s and during the 1980s in resistance to Socialist Realism, produced by artists such as those belonging to the Stars, is therefore marked by efforts to reconstruct a relatively autonomous sphere of artistic practice in contrast to the supposed challenge to artistic autonomy mounted by the western historical avant-gardes.[39] Although there is no substantive connection between the activities of the western avant-gardes and the Cultural Revolution, both can be understood to involve a blurring of boundaries between cultural practice and the life-world; the latter through various forms of street performance and visual expression, including big-character posters and the distribution of mass-reproduced images of Mao, carried out by Red Guards. The development of a non-socialist realist avant-garde art within the PRC after the ending of the Cultural Revolution consequently involved a necessary distancing from socially-embedded cultural practice.

Between 1973 and 1985 Yu produced a series of landscape, still life and portrait paintings strongly inflected by his study of European impressionism and post-impressionism (figs. 9 and 10). Most of the landscapes, which represent public spaces near to the Shanghai School of Arts and Crafts as well as parks in Shanghai, were produced in Yu's spare time. Some of the still life paintings were made in the classroom as examples for Yu's students, with the

Fig. 9

Yu Youhan. *Beethoven Still Life*. 1983.
Oil on canvas. 80 x 80 cm.

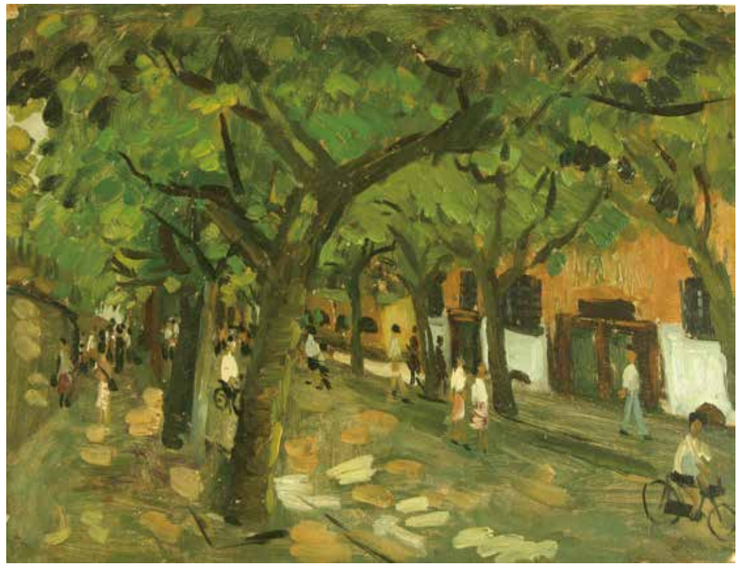


Fig. 10

Yu Youhan. *Wuxing Road 2*. 1982.
Oil on paper. 44 x 57 cm.

Fig. 11

Photographer unknown. Yu Youhan, Changle Road studio, Shanghai. 1980. Courtesy of the artist.

rest being completed at home (fig. 11). Because of the material impoverishment of everyday life in the PRC during the 1970s and a consequent shortage of painting materials, many of the paintings produced by Yu at that time were made with the application of oil paint onto paper and low-quality cardboard packaging supports. Canvases, when available, were primed by Yu himself with home-made glue-size. An advantage of the enforced simplicity of these materials and techniques is the robust durability of many of the paintings produced by Yu during the 1970s and early 1980s.[40]

From a western(ized) modernist perspective, Yu's post-impressionist paintings of the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s would appear to be little more than pale imitations of long-redundant western models. In the context of the PRC before and immediately after the ending of the Cultural Revolution, where western modernist approaches remained anathema in relation to established government cultural directives, they were however considerably less than orthodox. Portraits such as *Shen Rong* (1973; fig. 12) and landscapes such as *Hunan Road*

Fig. 12

Yu Youhan. *Shen Rong*. 1973. Oil on paper. 37.5 x 32.5 cm.

Fig. 13

Yu Youhan. *Hunan Road*. 1977. Oil on paper. 39.5 x 44 cm.

(1977; fig. 13) by Yu are among very few similarly formalist paintings produced in the PRC at that time. Other paintings of this kind include those produced by the No Name Group (*Wuming huahui*), some of whose members had been active in the PRC outside official artistic circles since the 1960s but who did not show their work in public there until 1979.[41] While Yu's post-impressionist-style paintings are as a series qualitatively variable, many are notable for their formal-technical accomplishment, not only in terms of compositional sophistication, gestural deftness and well-chosen sparseness of means, but also rich, highly aestheticized colour combinations.

In spite of his public position as a teacher, Yu's post-impressionist paintings did not attract official criticism or censure. Given the conspicuous divergence of Yu's paintings from officially accepted modes of Socialist Realism, this may at first seem surprising. During the mid- to late-1970s cultural production in the PRC was, however, no longer subject to the often arbitrary, highly Philistine attention it had received at the height of the Cultural Revolution. As a consequence, underground non-conformist

Fig. 14

Yu Youhan. *Symphony*. 1980. Poster paint on paper. 54 x 69 cm.

Fig. 15

Yu Youhan, Changle Road studio, Shanghai. c.1985. Courtesy of the artist.

cultural activity began to proliferate more widely within the PRC, including that associated with the impressionistic genre of writing known as 'Misty Poetry' (*Menglong shi*) and the illustrated literary magazine *Jintian* (*Today*). As an effectively private amateur painter in a location far from the centre of political power in Beijing, Yu posed no obvious threat to established state policy at a time when general public sentiment in the PRC was in any case beginning to look towards a healing of the social divisions opened up by the traumatic events of the Cultural Revolution — a sentiment publicly expressed by so-called 'Scar' literature and art in the PRC during the late 1970s and early 1980s.[42]

Following the death of Mao Zedong on 9 September 1976, the PRC entered into a period of pronounced political and social volatility. The years immediately following Mao's death not only saw the emergence into public view of the Chinese Democracy Movement, centred on the Democracy Wall in the Xidan district of Beijing, but also increasingly open criticism of the CCP and the traumatic events of the Cultural Revolution. Following the acceptance of Deng Xiaoping's policy of Opening and Reform, between 1980 and 1984 the CCP promoted a series of political campaigns and movements aimed at the preservation of social and political stability, including a government crackdown on the Democracy Movement and the Democracy Wall from March to December 1979 and the Campaign Against Bourgeois Liberalism of 1981. These culminated in the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign of October 1983 to February 1984, during which all unofficial public activities were, in principle at least, suspended, resulting in a significant curtailing of freedoms of public expression and the establishment of major restrictions on the ingress of westernized cultural and political thinking and practice.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s there was also within the PRC, somewhat paradoxically, a widely felt sense of cultural optimism at the promise of liberalization held out by Deng's reforms, referred to contemporaneously as 'Humanist Enthusiasm'. Until the Summer of 1989, and with varying degrees of intensity, this sense of optimism would support active public involvement in the CCP's centrally driven programme of economic and political reforms by overwriting the profound sense of alienation experienced by the Chinese people during the Cultural Revolution. Between 1980 and 1984 Humanist Enthusiasm supported a more or less clandestine liberalization of culture held back from full public view by the CCP's then restrictions on freedom of public expression.

From 1979, in the context of this contradictory climate of cultural optimism and political suppression, Yu began to make experimental abstract paintings. An exhibition of American art from the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston was staged at the Museum of National History near Yan'an East Road in Shanghai in 1981. This exhibition, which included twelve abstract paintings, exposed Yu for the first time to the work of western non-figurative painters other than Wassily Kandinsky and Mondrian — whose work he already knew in reproduction — changing his overall perception of western art and cementing his newly emerging abstractionist approach to painting.[43] In addition Yu gained access to a widening range of literature, including publications previously unavailable in the PRC during the Cultural Revolution.

Like others who would contribute to the development of contemporary art in the PRC during the 1980s, Yu's reading ranged widely across western as well as Chinese literature and philosophy. Alongside Nietzsche — staple reading for modern artists in China since the early twentieth century — Yu read western publications on science, religion and economics. The text that had the greatest impact on Yu, however, was the *Daodejing*, or *Laozi*, the classic of traditional Chinese thought. Exposure to Daoist thinking, which, among other things, upholds the conception of a harmonious reciprocation between seemingly opposing cosmic forces signified by the pairing *yin-yang*[44] as well as advocating spontaneous accordance with the *Dao*, or way of nature (*wu wei*, widely referred to in English as 'non-action'), caused Yu to reflect on the Maoist era as an abandonment of 'natural principles in the development of things'[45]. Yu began to yearn instead for what he describes as 'a free, peaceful diverse and harmonious society' wherein 'everyone may be fully actualized'[46]. Yu has commented that such a society is also proposed by Marxist philosophy. In spite of his developing philosophical and political awareness, Yu maintained a rigorous distinction, as he saw it, between politics and culture, stressing the autonomy of painting and the necessary spontaneity, humanity and rationality of artists.

Alongside official directives on the role of art in the immediate post-revolutionary period, there was also a return to formalist debates on the nature of art initiated in the PRC during the early 1960s. In June 1960 the French-trained artist Wu Guanzhong wrote an article titled 'On the Beauty of Form in Painting', the content of which diverged markedly from the established conventions of Maoist Socialist Realism by asserting that the principle value of painting lay in its formal beauty rather than its capacity to represent reality, that form should consequently not be subordinated to content, and that content should be made to coincide with form. Understandably, Wu's article remained unpublished during Mao's lifetime. In 1978 a new edition of Mao's *Letters on Poetry* was published, which included writings on the positive role that *xingxiang siwei* ('image-thinking') might play in the process of artistic creation. The publication of these writings by Mao opened up an ideologically acceptable space for renewed public debate on the relationship between form and content in official Chinese art. This debate was initiated by the publication of Wu's article, which finally appeared in print in the magazine *Meishuzazhi* (*Art*) in May 1979. The publication of Wu's article lead to a string of others between 1979 and 1986, including an official rebuttal by the conservative critic Jiang Feng, and responses by Wu in 1980 and 1981. The critic Liu Shaohui published a defence of Wu's position, titled 'Emotion, Individuality, Formal Aesthetics', in 1979, which stressed the importance of individual creativity over collective action rooted in official ideology.[47]

Yu's early experiments with abstraction involve stylistically varied, geometric and painterly compositions of dots, lines and fields of colours (fig. 14), some of which are reminiscent of paintings by the Swiss artist Paul Klee as well as illustrations in Klee's *Pedagogical Sketchbook* (1925). The circular *yuan* motif, which is a recurrent feature of Yu's mature abstract style and which was inflected by the early 'plus and minus' abstractions of Mondrian, came about through the making of two large-scale abstract paintings produced by Yu between 1984 and 1985 (fig. 15). The Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign was brought to an abrupt end in February 1984. The ending of the campaign lead to a significant relaxation of political attitudes

Fig. 16

Photographer unknown. Yu Youhan. c.1985. Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 17

Zhao Wuji. *10.12.74*. 1974. Oil on canvas. 70 x 80 cm. Courtesy of Alisan Fine Arts, Hong Kong.

and, as a further consequence, the opening up of ideological space for the public showing of avant-garde (*qianwei*) non-socialist realist art. It also resulted in the emergence of the movement known as the '85 New Wave, which provided a collective focus for the development of avant-garde visual art in the PRC throughout the second half of the 1980s[48]. Yu's two earliest circular abstract paintings were first shown at a six-person group exhibition of Central Academy of Arts and Crafts graduates staged at Fudan University in Shanghai in 1985 (fig. 16). This exhibition was the first major public showing of Yu's work, in which he exhibited a total of eleven paintings representative of his previously clandestine development as an abstract painter. Yu ceased work on his post-impressionist style paintings in 1985, turning solely to the production of abstract paintings from 1985 to 1988. The trajectory of Yu's turn to abstraction arguably parallels that within Europe and the US during the early twentieth century, which also developed more or less sequentially in relation to an earlier period of post-impressionist painting.

A significant factor shaping the development of the '85 New Wave was a major exhibition of work by the American artist Robert Rauschenberg, staged at the National Art Museum in Beijing between 18 November and 5 December 1985 under the joint curatorial direction of Dr Donald Staff and Chun-Wuei Su Chien. The exhibition, which occupied the entirety of the museum's 2,250-square-metre first floor, was the first solo showing of the work of a living modern western artist to be held in the PRC. It was part of a collaborative project between Rauschenberg and local artisans, known as the Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange project (ROCI China), which took place between 1985 and 1991. Work produced as a result of this collaborative project brought together traditional Chinese art- and craft-making techniques with images and found objects from everyday Chinese life. The Rauschenberg exhibition attracted more than 300,000 visitors over the course of its three-week run.

While few, if any, of those who saw the exhibition would have grasped the deconstructive implications of Rauschenberg's neo-avant-garde use of collage-montage, pastiche and appropriation with any degree of conceptual rigour — as the article 'Beijing Theorists' Reactions to the Art of Robert Rauschenberg', published in the magazine *Zhongguo meishu bao* (*Fine Arts in China*), shows — the extreme unorthodoxy of his work in that context nevertheless sparked significant debate and controversy.[49] Among the audience for the Rauschenberg exhibition were many artists and critics associated with the '85 New Wave, who saw within it possibilities for the development of an indigenous modern art, involving a bringing together of local materials, techniques and imagery with Western artistic thought and practice, outside the established conventions of Maoist and post-Maoist Socialist Realism. Yu did not attend the Rauschenberg exhibition, but saw photographs of the installations it contained reproduced in art magazines. In contrast to the earlier Boston Museum of Fine Arts exhibition in Shanghai, the Rauschenberg exhibition did not have a direct impact on Yu's work.

Again, from a western(ized) modernist perspective Yu's early abstract paintings produced between 1979 and 1988 may be interpreted as a revisiting of a once progressive but now critically redundant style. That reading is supported by Yu's view of the significance of his circular *yuan* motif, which, he asserts, is an expression of, […] the inertia and freedom of movements in the universe. […] it also includes people's thought process. I believe there is a commonality in all matters of the universe, which consists of combinations and movements of minute units. […] The genesis and development of all matters follow its inherent law, like the natural formation of a forest. […] Everything is determined by natural conditions, people are powerless. […] Man can only exercise his power within certain limits and should not abuse it. […] The movements of all matters do not depend on man's will, that's the right of all matters to develop. It would rather cease without freedom. Free spirit is ubiquitous in the universe, on earth, in human society, and within the individual. Those who distort or suppress it are the enemy of the universe and nature, who is bound for failure. […] what I wished to express is my respect for philosophy and the spirit of freedom. […] I rendered rich images of movements with the simplest composition and free-spirited strokes in basic colours, in order to present an effect of multiple dispositions so I could arrive at a harmonious effect — beauty, beauty is the respect. […] Black and white are the two colours that represent solemnity and respect, that are suitable for the "circle" series — representing the basic movements of the universe abstractly, symbolically and systematically.[50]

The notion espoused here by Yu of a harmonious universal order based on complementary interaction between otherwise opposing qualities is strongly redolent of Daoism's central metaphysical conception of the *Dao* or way of nature, as is Yu's associated upholding of the notion of spontaneity in accordance with the way of nature. Both of which echo attitudes expressed by early twentieth-century European abstract painters, such as Kandinsky and Klee, who viewed their work in similar, though differently expressed, transcendental-metaphysical terms.[51]

The view that Yu's abstract paintings are belated in relation to the innovations of twentieth-century western modernism is further supported by his use of gestural marks reminiscent of traditional Chinese ink and brush painting in combination with the 'all over' visual effects of western(ized) abstraction in the making of those paintings. This combination of indigenous traditional and western(ized) modernist techniques resonates with similar culturally hybrid approaches taken by western and westernized abstract painters of the mid-twentieth century such as Mark Tobey and Zhao Wuji (fig. 17).

In relation to the immediate circumstances of their production and reception within the PRC during the latter half of the 1980s, where realist discourses on art remained dominant and where memories of the anti-traditional iconoclasm of the Cultural Revolution persisted strongly in the public consciousness, Yu's early abstract paintings were nevertheless, like his post-impressionist paintings in the context of the PRC during the 1970s and early 1980s, inescapably challenging works. Moreover, they established for the first time a signature iconography particular to Yu imbued with an insistent auratic aesthetic presence. As Edward Lucie-Smith has commented, Yu 'was one of the first "western style" painters [of the post-socialist era] in China to find an artistic language that was unmistakably his own'.[52] The challenging status of Yu's abstract circular paintings within the immediate context of their production in the PRC, as well as their signature quality and auratic presence, was recognized by the inclusion of three of those paintings in the era-defining survey exhibition

Fig. 18

Exhibition poster. China/Avant-garde. 1989. National Art Museum of China, Beijing.

China/Avant-garde, staged in Beijing between 5 and 17 February 1989 — an exhibition which encompassed and effectively drew a line under the collective activities of the '85 New Wave. (Fig. 18)

Yu's early circular paintings, which were made using acrylic paint on fine-weave canvas, involve large-scale realisations of simple compositions, sometimes established solely in the imagination and sometimes through small thumbnail sketches. In some cases a single compositional motif was worked on over a series of perhaps six or seven paintings, from which the most successful were singled out. Yu's early circular paintings are predominantly monochrome. They were made through an initial drawing of lines and dots using black, ink-like consistency paint on a white ground, over and around which were applied washes of grey and black paint. Unlike some western modernist painters, such as Henri Matisse and Willem de Kooning, Yu resisted any radical obliteration and reworking of his circular paintings, preferring instead to achieve a spontaneously progressive part-by-part balance between passages of painting across a canvas. Often the early circular paintings would become clogged — or as Yu puts it 'shattered'[53] — through overworking. In such cases Yu sometimes overpainted the canvas in black, beginning again through the application of white lines and dots.

Yu's move away from the use of oil to acrylic on canvas was made possible by increasing access within the PRC to a wider range of art materials during the 1980s. However, the low quality of acrylic paints available in the PRC at this time, combined with Yu's untutored tendency to place black or white washes of different drying speeds over one another, has resulted over time in the cracking of the surfaces of many of his early circular paintings, forcing Yu in some cases to constantly rework and repair them.

In 1988, the year before the exhibiting of his abstract paintings at China/Avant-garde, Yu became interested in the work of western Pop artists, including Richard Hamilton and Andy Warhol. This emerging interest was not simply a formal or art-historical one. It was also provoked by the changing social context in the PRC, which was by then, as a consequence of Opening and Reform, moving rapidly — in urban areas at least — from the materially impoverished collectivism of the Maoist era towards a more affluent and individualistic market-oriented outlook. Yu began to feel that his abstract style of painting was — because of its extreme subjectivist detachment from the life-world — inadequate to an engagement with the extraordinary social and economic changes going on around him, and consequently looked to other means. As Yu states in an interview from 2009, 'Art is humanity's emotional expression towards nature and the outside world. If the outside world changes, an artist should respond to these changes and act accordingly.'[54] Yu's eventual shift towards the making of Pop paintings is arguably comparable to the emergence of Pop and neo-Dada in Europe and the US during the 1950s and early 1960s as a neo-realist reaction to the extreme formalism of painterly abstraction.

Between the ending of the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign in 1984 and a similar campaign of cultural suppression carried out between mid-1989 and 1992, there was not only a period of unprecedented economic growth but also of relatively unfettered social and cultural liberalization within the PRC. This was accompanied by a heightened sense of the humanist optimism that had first emerged there during the late 1970s and early 1980s, as well as a desire to reflect critically on the past as

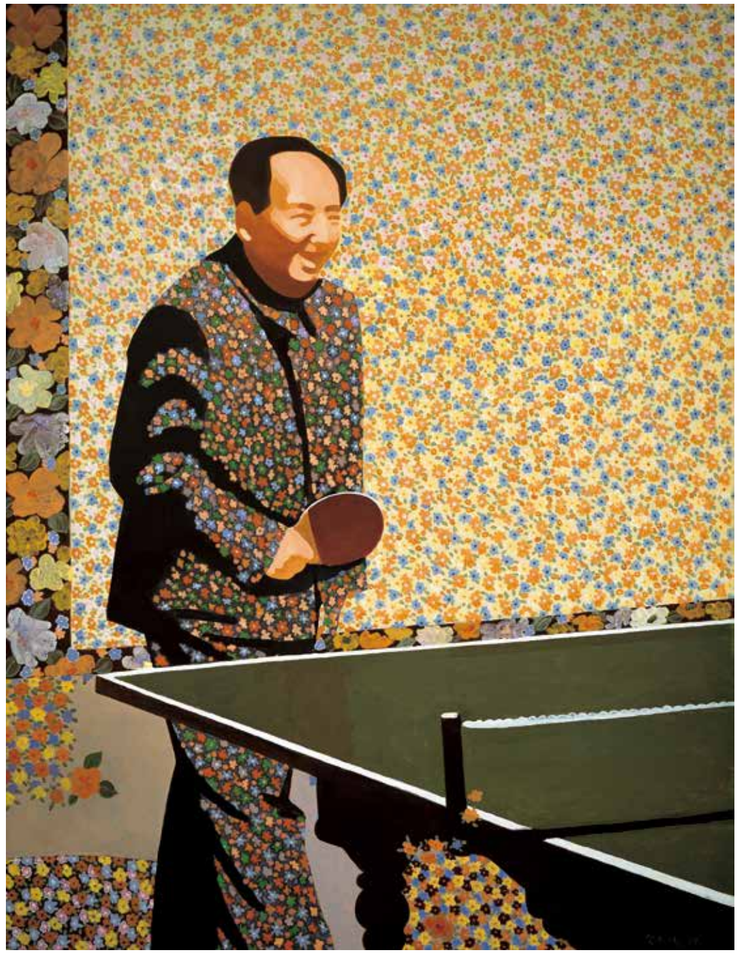


Fig. 19

Yu Youhan. *Mao Playing Ping-Pong*. 1992. Acrylic on canvas. 155 x 118 cm.

a way of establishing a suitable basis for future socio-economic and cultural progress. While Shanghai remained something of a backwater in terms of economic development until Deng's so-called Southern Tour of 1992 — which restarted Opening and Reform after a hiatus initiated by the social unrest of early summer of 1989 — the city nevertheless underwent significant material changes during the 1980s.

Against this backcloth of national and localized socio-economic and cultural change, in 1988 Yu produced a number of experimental paintings involving appropriations of photographic images. These experimental paintings include a series of four on the subject of the PRC's currency, the Renminbi, as well as others related to aspects of western art and architectural history. In the case of some of these paintings there is a bringing together of appropriated photographic imagery with the signature line-and-dot mark-making developed by Yu as part of the production of his early circular paintings.

Between late 1988 and early 1989 Yu made his first series of Pop paintings incorporating appropriated images of Mao Zedong. This series includes paintings of Mao at Tiananmen during the Cultural Revolution and of Mao surrounded by flowers (fig. 19). The first paintings by Yu incorporating images

of Mao were made independently of similar works produced by Wang Guangyi and Li Shan around the same time. Yu continued to make Pop paintings incorporating images of Mao until the late 1990s, producing many of his best known and most ambitious works in this series during the period between the summer of 1989 and Deng's Southern Tour of spring 1992. During his Southern Tour, Deng visited the southern seaboard cities of Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Zhuhai and Shanghai, identifying them as leading centres for modernization and economic reform, while at the same time criticizing those opposed to reform. By doing this, Deng was able to generate crucial local support for his reforms supported by the slogan 'To Get Rich is Glorious'. Initially, conservative elements in the CCP — including the then leader of the PRC, Jiang Zemin — sought to suppress media reports of Deng's tour. Reports were nevertheless published in the Shanghai press, garnering additional support for Deng among officials and the general populace of the PRC outside southern China. For Yu, the period of cultural retrenchment between the summer of 1989 and 1992 was no doubt yet another in a series of intermittent periods of political suppression to be worked through and eventually overcome. Yu continued to produce abstract paintings until the early 1990s, imbricating with the production of his early Pop paintings.

During the early 1990s paintings by Yu were included in some of the first exhibitions to showcase contemporary art from the PRC to international audiences. These include the 45th Venice Biennale; 1st Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane; Mao Goes Pop, China Post '89, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney and Victoria National Gallery, Melbourne; China Avant-garde, touring exhibition, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Hildesheim Art Gallery, Kunsthall, Rotterdam, Brandts Klaederfabrik, Odense, and the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford; China's New Art, Post-1989, Hong Kong Arts Centre, Hong Kong (all 1993); and the 22nd International Biennial of São Paulo (1994).

As a result of the inclusion of his work in these seminal exhibitions, Yu established a major international profile alongside Wang Guangyi and Li Shan as one of the progenitors of Political Pop. Although the exhibitions in question comprised a wide range of technically and stylistically differing works, international audiences were drawn most strongly to those associated with the so-called genres of Political Pop and Cynical Realism (*Wanshi xianshi zhuyi*) — the latter depicting human figures with faces convulsed by expressions of what can be interpreted as politically resistant disingenuous laughter. Even now works associated with those genres dominate the popular imagination outside China, along with the work and reputation of Ai Weiwei, as iconic representatives of artistic political dissent within the PRC.

International exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art in the early 1990s were followed swiftly by the construction of an indigenous internationalized infrastructure for the making, showing and selling of art that began to emerge in the PRC from the mid-1990s onwards. Among the major centres developed as part of this emerging infrastructure was the 798 Art Zone in Beijing, initiated in 1995 by members of the faculty of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, who began to rent recently decommissioned factory space at Dashanzi in the Chaoyang district of Beijing. Through the late 1990s, numerous artists and entrepreneurs established studios and gallery-cum-exhibition spaces at 798, which rapidly became a focus for growing international and local interest in

Fig. 20

Yu Youhan. *The Big Union*. 1994.
Acrylic on canvas. 116 x 157.5 cm.

contemporary Chinese art.

Similar art zones sprang up in other cities in the PRC throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. These include Shanghai's M50 art district, which began with the setting up of artists' studios in disused factory spaces in 2000 and which now houses major galleries such as ShanghArt and Eastlink. The development of an internationalized infrastructure for contemporary art in the PRC throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s provided a platform for commercialization involving foreign galleries and auction houses as well as points of entry into the indigenous contemporary Chinese art scene for non-Chinese collectors. It also opened up opportunities for Chinese artists and galleries to become significant players on the international stage. Yu was one of the first contemporary artists in the PRC to become an internationally recognised figure in relation to this developing infrastructure. Although no formal contract exists, Yu first presented his work to ShanghArt for sale and exhibition in 1997. His first solo exhibition at the gallery, Ah! Us!, was staged in 1999.

The predominant colour in many of Yu's early Pop paintings is red (fig. 20), echoing Yu's recollections of the prevalence of that

Fig. 21 (right)

Yu Youhan. *Five Women – Portrait 3*. 2000-2001. Acrylic on canvas. 155 x 130 cm.

Fig. 22 (far right)

Yu Youhan. *Five Women – Portrait 4*. 2000-2001. Acrylic on canvas. 155 x 130 cm.

colour as part of street demonstrations during the Cultural Revolution. Yu's use of red also resonates with the Maoist directive handed down during the Cultural Revolution that painters should incorporate red into their work as a way of signifying hope and optimism. This directive, which was accompanied by the two doctrines 'Red Light, Bright' and 'The Three Prominences', supported Mao's view that socialist art in the PRC should not only reflect the reality of the masses and serve the revolutionary aims of the CCP, but also invoke positive feelings of joy and uplift. The former of the two doctrines in question required artists to include the colour red in paintings both as a symbol of revolution and as a traditional signifier of happiness and good fortune, alongside brightness as a symbol of hope. The latter required the prominent placement of generic representations of soldiers, workers and peasants as the three principal heroic groups at the forefront of the revolutionary masses.

Throughout the 1950s, official support for Soviet-style oil painting and sculpture placed traditional Chinese painting under a degree of ideological suspicion as a residual aspect of China's pre-Communist feudal society. Towards the end of the 1950s, however, Soviet-style oil painting fell out of official favour to some degree, as a consequence of weakening links with the Soviet Union. This resulted in an enthusiasm for traditional and indigenous folk styles as politicized forms of expression. This shift in official thinking was signalled by a speech given by the Chinese culture minister in 1957, insisting on the validity of China's indigenous cultural traditions and that not everything coming from the West — meaning, in this case, from the Soviet Union — was correct. At that time, Mao issued a slogan, 'Revolutionary Romanticism Combined with Revolutionary Realism', which upheld the importance of national poetic and romantic traditions alongside the use of Socialist Realism.

Throughout the 1950s, Mao also encouraged the development of proletarian art through a mass movement known as the Rural Art Movement, initiated in 1950. As a result, numerous CCP-supported proletarian art groups and art classes sprang up in cities and rural areas across the PRC. As Tang Xiaobing has argued, while Maoist Socialist Realism was purportedly an objective representation of the reality of the masses, in practice it tended to present revolutionary politics as an overcoming of the everyday in a manner intended to replace the anxiety of material existence with something akin to a collective spiritual transcendence.[55]

Mao's conception of Romantic Realism dominated cultural production in the PRC from the late 1950s through to the immediate aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. Excepting Mao and other high-level CCP members, Romantic Realism tends away from the depiction of specific individuals, presenting instead idealized and invariably joyful revolutionary 'types' based around the three supposedly politically dominant groups of workers, soldiers and peasants. Yu's early paintings of Mao repeat many of the tropes of Romantic Realism but often with distinctly divergent collage-like juxtapositions of Chinese revolutionary and western popular/capitalist imagery. There is in addition a distinct preoccupation with flatness and all-over design of a kind similar to that found in relation to works by western Pop artists such as Richard Hamilton and Andy Warhol.

The juxtaposition of images of Mao with those of smiling women — both revolutionary types and, sometimes scantily clad, western fashion models and pop singers — as well as surface-pattern-like fields of floral decoration in the context of Yu's Pop paintings, was intended by him as a way of offsetting 'a tension within the image, presenting a sense of intimacy [and] warmth', thereby attenuating 'the harsh atmosphere of the Cultural Revolution'.[56] By remotivating the significance of the imagery of the Cultural Revolution in this way, Yu aimed to portray Mao 'as a person rather than an emperor, as someone who is the same as the rest of the masses'.[57] Contrary to the widely held notion within the international art world — which emerged in relation to the first exhibitions of contemporary art from China during the early 1990s — that Political Pop and Cynical Realism are both implacably resistant to the authority of the Chinese state, it is therefore clear that the intended political and critical significance of Yu's Pop paintings is rather less decidable.

While Yu is critical of the harshness of the Cultural Revolution, he gives no sense of wishing to depart from the Romantic ideals of Maoist socialism as he understands them. Yu has commented that while he would like to make a 'contribution to Chinese society' through his Political Pop paintings by pulling down 'Mao's position as a saint', making him into an 'ordinary person', he does not wish to 'demonize' the PRC's former leader. In Yu's view, his Political Pop paintings are an attempt to 'reveal feelings about the betrayal of socialism' within the PRC rather than to write its obituary. He also enjoins us to look carefully for 'unstable elements in the background suggesting that disaster may take place at any time'.[58]

Moreover, in breaking with his previously highly aestheticized abstract style, Yu did not seek to develop a distinctly non-autonomous socially engaged art. Rather he looked towards a traditional Chinese emphasis on an aesthetics of the implicit (*yin*) as well as the explicit (*hsiu*) in art[59] to situate his Mao series simultaneously as both socially and politically engaged history painting and as aesthetically independent. In this light, the political significance of Yu's Pop paintings may be taken, in the context of abiding sensitivities with regard to the standing of Mao within reform-era China, as an understandably latent aspect of otherwise manifestly aestheticized art works. Yu can thus be understood to have suspended the positioning of his work uncertainly between apparent opposites both in terms of its signified political connotations and its formal standing in relation to society. In doing so, Yu can also be interpreted as making a shift from the oppositional aestheticism of his post-impressionist and early abstract paintings to what might be described, from a westernized discursive perspective at least, as a form of deconstructively re-motivational allegorical postmodernism.

Yu ceased to make Political Pop paintings incorporating images of Mao in 1998. In an unrecorded conversation with the author Yu asserts that his decision to end the Political Pop series came about as the result of official pressure related to a visa application for overseas travel. During the late 1990s and early 2000s Yu continued to make figurative paintings based on appropriations of photographic images (figs. 21 and 22). However, these paintings, referred to collectively under the series title Ah! Us!, which are often largely monochrome, roughly expressionistic and faux-naïve in style, no longer sit convincingly with the term 'Political Pop'.

Although the Ah! Us! paintings continue to montage images representing aspects of Chinese history, including in many cases individual and group portraits of unspecified women workers, they no longer sustain the formal resolution of many of Yu's Pop paintings of the late 1980s and 1990s. Indeed,

many would appear to be unresolved or unresolvable in formal terms. In the context of Yu's wider oeuvre, the series of paintings in question would appear to be a grouping of interstitial works that straddle elements of Political Pop and the hybrid landscapes produced by Yu after 2002. This interstitial quality by no means disqualifies Yu's turn-of-the-millennium figurative paintings as a focus of aesthetic interest. Many have been subject to significant overpainting and reworking that marks them out as some of Yu's most struggled with and, from a painter's point of view, technically satisfying works.

Hybrid Landscapes, Foreign Maos, Later Abstracts

FROM THE LATE 1990S YU BEGAN TO DEVELOP two new series of paintings: one that brings together traditional Chinese and western techniques to represent landscapes and gardens (fig. 23); and another that involves the montaging of images of Mao into representations of iconic works of art from Europe and the US.

The former was initiated following a week-long visit to Bianqiao in the Yimeng Mountains (*Yimeng shan*) region of China during spring and early summer of 2002. Yu and eleven other teachers from the Shanghai School of Arts and Crafts decided to visit this part of rural China to assess its suitability as a place to take their students on outdoor drawing expeditions. The Yimeng Mountains are at the heart of an agrarian and materially impoverished region, from where, during the last three decades, most young people have departed to find work in China's developing urban areas, adding to the vast army of migrant workers, the dispersed cohorts of which can now to be found in every major city in the PRC. In 2002 the Yimeng Mountains region contrasted strongly with urban Shanghai, which had by then expanded significantly and become materially enriched as a result of nearly a decade of economic and industrial reforms in the wake of Deng's Southern Tour.

Throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, there were major changes in relation to the economic and political outlook of the PRC. Following a regional economic downturn in east and south-east Asia in 1997, at the end of the 1990s and into the early 2000s, the PRC's economy began to boom prodigiously, with annual growth rates in gross domestic product of around 10 per cent. After sixteen years of negotiation the PRC became a full member of the World Trade Organisation on 11 December 2001. Political conditions became more liberal, both in terms of domestic socio-economic governance and international collaboration. Between the death of Deng Xiaoping in February 1997 and the handover of Hong Kong from British to Chinese control in July of the same year, there was a short-lived period of intensified liberalization in mainland China, sometimes referred to as the second Beijing Spring, following an earlier period of liberalization within the PRC immediately following the death of Mao known as the Beijing Spring. During the second Beijing Spring the China Democracy Party was established and officially registered by some local authorities in the PRC. The PRC also became a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. At the same time, there were increasingly confident assertions of Chinese national-cultural exceptionalism within the PRC, underpinned by an officially supported return to Confucian values of social harmony in the face of the profoundly destabilizing and alienating effects of economic and social reform.

Yu's working visit to the Yimeng Mountains region resulted in something of an epiphany. While Shanghai had in his view become a less honest and happy place as a result of the PRC's embracing of market values, the relatively undeveloped Yimeng Mountains retained a magical authenticity redolent of deep geological time. In seeking to represent the landscapes of the region, Yu did not adopt a single stylistic approach. Instead he developed hybrid stylistic approaches that were informed not only by close study of western and Chinese landscape painting but also a sense of the difficulty of achieving innovations in both at the beginning of the twenty-first century under the extreme weight of combined cultural and historical precedence. This sense of history's oppressive weight resonates with

Fig. 23

Yu Youhan. *Yimeng Mountain 5*. 2002.
Acrylic on canvas. 150 x 240 cm.

Fig. 24

Yu Youhan. *Yimeng Mountain 20*. 2006.
Acrylic on canvas. 20 x 44 cm.

Fig. 25

Joseph Wright. *Blot Drawing of Landscape*.
c.1785-86. Sepia ink on paper. 27.6 x 39.4 cm.
Derby Museums Trust.

similar feelings expressed by early European modernists, such as Eugène Delacroix and Edouard Manet, who saw themselves — and by extension the entirety of modern European painting — as fundamentally inadequate to the signal achievements of the Renaissance and the Baroque.[60]

From a westernized discursive perspective after modernism, Yu's hybrid landscapes are made open to interpretation as sites of deconstructive grafting wherein differing styles are combined and the authority of their respective cultural identities negated through productive remotivation. However, such a reading is not supported by Yu's stated intentions in making the paintings. Although Yu has described his bringing together of western and Chinese landscape styles as a form of 'mélange', he also asserts that 'each painting aims to be complete and consistent'.[61] In other words, Yu's intention in making the hybrid landscapes was not to arrive at a series of unsettling deconstructive juxtapositions, but instead a sense of synthetic harmony and combinatory stylistic uplift. It is perhaps of interest to note in this respect that some of Yu's hybrid landscapes bear a close resemblance to ink drawings produced by eighteenth-century British artists such as Alexander Cozens and Joseph Wright (figs. 24 and 25) that may have been produced with knowledge of traditional Chinese *shan-shui* (mountains and water) landscape painting.[62]

There is also evidence to suggest that Yu's aim was not, however, to bring about an entirely balanced or harmonious combination of western and Chinese cultural outlooks, as his stated adherence to Daoist thinking in relation to the making of abstract paintings during the 1980s and 1990s might suggest. Rather, as he makes clear in a conversation included in the catalogue accompanying an exhibition of his hybrid landscapes at the ShanghArt Gallery in 2004, Yu envisioned the paintings in question ultimately as an expression of cultural Chineseness rooted metaphorically in the very soil of China. Here Yu responds to a question enquiring whether he considers the hybrid landscape paintings to be a form of counter-cultural rebellion in the following rather tangential and perhaps, from a western post-Holocaust perspective, unsettling way:

> The "Political Pop" was a new direction when I was doing it. Now, Pop Art is the mainstream of contemporary Chinese art. I need to go in a new direction now. The Pop language was a tool. I am finished with that concept. Maybe I will use that tool again; I don't know. Pop Art is like moving a western tree to Chinese soil, like breeding a western tree with a Chinese tree. I want to make an art that is like a Chinese tree growing naturally from Chinese soil.[63]

Clearly, for Yu in the context of this conversation the hybrid landscapes were not intended simply to be a combination of western and Chinese visual languages but a subsuming of the former within a dominant, historically rooted indigenous Chinese cultural-discursive schema. As such they may also be interpreted as an attempt to go beyond a static or indeed asymmetrical West-East cultural dialectic.

In the preface to the same catalogue Yu asserts the ultimate autonomy of his hybrid paintings from western cultural dominance with reference to the by then pervasive impact of the work of Marcel Duchamp on contemporary art in the PRC. He writes,

> This show is initially named the "Ultra-concept Art Show".
>
> It is a conventional painting show with a trendy name.
>
> The link between art and concept is trendy now. Unfortunately, for me, "ultra" means exceeding, while "ultra-concept" means "no concept".
>
> Why did I draw paintings "without" concept? Because there are too many "concepts" in art. I am unable to identify which are new, which are old, which are concepts, and which are not. 80 years ago Marcel Duchamp challenged art with a urinal. I understand that he was opposing the narrowness of art, but today, a new narrowness has been formed again. Ever-innovative art is full of concepts and strangeness, while lacking value. Honesty is being beaten by tricks.
>
> Art is valued for its freedom, and I have the right to choose.
>
> Away from the pollution and noise of cities, between the blue sky and pure people, I feel extraordinarily happy. I always think I can make something while inspired by my own life.
>
> Therefore I draw, I can only draw, because I love it, like Duchamp loved chess.
>
> Duchamp said, his life was his best art.
>
> I say, my art is my best life.
>
> This is my concept.
>
> Thus, "art without concept" can be interpreted as "ultra-concept art".[64]

Prima facie, this statement may appear to be little more than a conservative justification for what are, in the final analysis — despite their knowing hybridization of styles — relatively conventionally crafted landscape paintings against the rising tide of post-Duchampian conceptual art among younger artists in the PRC after the turn of the millennium. Yu was by this time in his early sixties. However, it is important to register here a complex confluence of ideas aimed at resisting discursive limitations on artistic practice. In appealing both to what might be seen as traces of the traditional Daoist ideal of a harmonious interrelationship between humanity and nature — following the precept of non-action (*wu wei*), without the controlling intervention of preconceived concepts — as well as the *avant la lettre* deconstructive (negative-productive) implications of the Duchampian readymade, Yu mounts a telling assault not only on the constraints of a youthful slavery to fashion, but, in the context of the PRC, the abiding impact of western cultural imperialism.

For an artist who lived through the crushing circumstances of the Cultural Revolution and who came to national prominence as part of the development of a relatively autonomous 'avant-garde' art world within the PRC after the death of Mao, such mixed — and, it has to be said from a western rationalist perspective, contradictory — thinking is not entirely without telling critical significance. One cannot help conjecturing that Duchamp — who himself warned against the addictive dangers of an unreflexive over-use of readymades — may well have approved.

That having been said, there is also perhaps from a western discursive perspective — as previously suggested — a rather less easily embraced tincture of 'blood

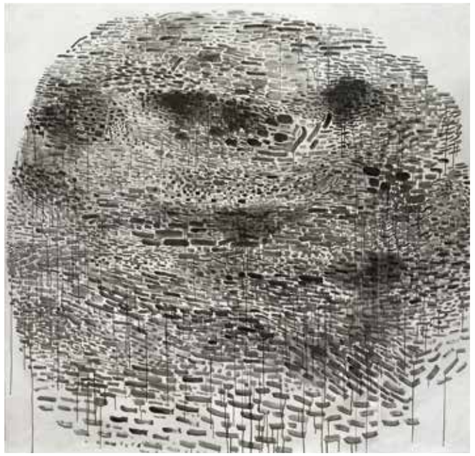
and soil' nationalism running throughout Yu's hybrid landscape series. Both this, and Yu's evident resistance to western cultural dominance, can be aligned with what was by the early 2000s in the context of a booming economy within the PRC an increasingly confident sense of national cultural exceptionalism. Yu's position is also redolent of a continuing socialist fixation within post-imperial China since the early twentieth century on the value of the simplicity of peasant life to cultural production; something experienced by Yu during his time as a student in Beijing, reprised by his working visit to the Yimeng Mountains region in 2002 and reasserted by President Xi Jinping's demand as chair of the Forum for Literature and Art in Beijing in 2014 that artists should look once again to rural life for political and artistic inspiration. To complicate matters, however, Yu has not sought to associate himself publicly with official assertions of Chineseness as part of projections of soft power outside and attempts to construct a cultural industries sector within the PRC since the early 2000s. Evidently for Yu, freedom from constraint on his practice as a painter — whether western or localized — remains of paramount importance. In 2003, Yu retired

Fig. 26

Yu Youhan. *A Pocket Western Art History About Mao: Vincent van Gogh*. 2000-2002.
Oil on canvas. 101.5 x 126 cm.

Fig. 27

Yu Youhan. *2007.11.12*. 2007.
Acrylic on canvas. 250 x 250 cm.



from his position as a teacher at the Shanghai School of Arts and Crafts.

The other new series of paintings developed by Yu after 2002, titled collectively as 'Foreign Maos', is to some extent a variation on the theme of his Political Pop paintings of the late 1980s and early 1990s, interpolating as it does images of Mao within often highly faithful re-presentations of iconic artworks by, amongst others, Paul Gaugin, Cézanne, Henri Rousseau, van Gogh, Robert Ryman and Anselm Kiefer. The production of this series was, Yu asserts, inspired by the Maoist slogan 'People of the World Love Chairman Mao' promulgated at the time of the Cultural Revolution, as well as a desire, evidenced through paintings such as *Foreign Maos: van Gogh* (2002; fig. 26) and *Foreign Maos: Gaugin 2* (1999), to enquire into the past sufferings of the poor[65] — an almost certainly allegorized reference to the widespread famine that took hold in the PRC in part as a result of the Great Leap Forward (1958-61).

Again, from a western(ized) discursive perspective after modernism these interpolations are made open to interpretation as deconstructive in outcome. However, it is unclear that the notion of pastiche attached to such juxtapositions in the context of western(ized) postmodernist art can be applied definitively to Yu's Foreign Maos series. As Fredric Jameson has described it, postmodernist pastiche involves a knowingly hollow recapitulation or allegorizing of existing images and styles in a manner intended to problematize any sense of their originality or authenticity. This contrasts, Jameson argues, with notions of parody whereby existing forms and styles are mocked while a sense of their singular presence continues to be upheld.[66] Yu's faithful reprising of iconic western artworks, although playful in tone, demonstrates a respect very much at odds with the former. It is also important to note here Yu's arguably, from a western discursive perspective, Rousseauian perception of the Yimeng Mountains region as a site of historically abiding authenticity in contrast to a supposed absence of honesty and happiness in reform-era urban Shanghai, which resonates with the traditional Chinese notion of the *yimin*, or scholar who withdraws from the world into nature. Any categorization of Yu's Foreign Maos series as definitively postmodernist in intent is therefore very much open to question.

From 2007 Yu returned to the abstract style he had developed during the second half of the 1980s and early 1990s. While these later abstracts are for the most part stylistically indistinguishable from those produced by Yu previously, there is in many cases either a highly concentrated part-by-part reworking of surfaces or an understated simplicity of application that marks them out as the work of an accomplished — albeit largely untutored — late-career virtuoso (fig. 27). Although this concentrated part-by-part reworking and understated simplicity often detracts from the visual impact of the paintings concerned — certainly when seen in comparison with some of Yu's starker monochrome abstracts of the 1980s and 1990s — it also imbues a sense of nuanced aesthetic complexity sometimes absent from or attenuated in Yu's earlier abstract works.

As well as being included in numerous exhibitions outside the PRC after 2002, Yu's work was also featured in two landmark exhibitions inside China. The first of these was the major retrospective survey exhibition '85 New Wave: the birth of Chinese contemporary art, staged at the then recently established Ullens Center for Contemporary

Fig. 28

Installation view of '85 New Wave: the birth of Chinese contemporary art, Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing. 5 November, 2007 - 17 February, 2008. Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing.

Art in the 798 district of Beijing between 5 November 2007 and 17 February 2008, which featured works produced by artists involved in the development of avant-garde art in China during the second half of the 1980s. Works by Yu included in the Ullens exhibition were limited — almost certainly in the context of Beijing for reasons of political sensitivity — to abstract paintings produced during the 1980s and early 1990s (fig. 28), thereby excluding Political Pop paintings produced at the end of the 1980s. Works by Wang Guangyi included in the Ullens exhibition were also limited to those without appropriated images of Mao. In 2013 the populist politician Bo Xilai was sentenced to life imprisonment for corruption, an event that not only attests to the challenge presented by Bo's popularity to the authority of the incoming president of the PRC, Xi Jinping, but also a continuing wariness within the CCP with regard to personality politics after the death of Mao. Under such conditions, Yu's and Wang's Political Pop paintings retain a problematic political significance.

The catalogue accompanying the Ullens exhibition includes a previously unpublished statement by Yu written in 1985 on the significance of his circular *yuan* paintings. Yu writes,

> In the back and forth of my thinking and practice, I have settled on a simple image — the circle — as the primary subject of my paintings. Because of its stability, the circle can express both the beginning and the end of everything, and thus can also serve as a metaphor for both the fleeting moment and eternity. The circle symbolises the movement of cycles, as well as the movements of expansion and contraction. So it manifests capacious generosity, reason and harmony. The circle can be a dot or an infinitely large surface, a microscopic particle or a macroscopic overview. Self-enclosed, the circle is quiet and withheld. In my paintings, I try my best to unify the opposites of plainness and wisdom, quietude and activity, the eternal and the ever-changing, and "nothingness" and "being".[67]

Here Yu draws on a traditional Eastern use of the circle as a symbol of the notion of an 'eternal return' in which all things move in endlessly repeated inconclusive cycles between beginnings and endings and in which all things, including beginnings and endings, constantly transform one into the other. In doing so he can also be understood to underscore his stated adherence to Daoist principles of harmonious interaction between apparent opposites as well as the associated conception of non-action (*wu wei*). Indeed, by the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century Yu had begun to extend that adherence beyond the circular abstracts to the entirety of his oeuvre, stating 'I want my art to be identified with Laozi's ideas. The world is eternally alive and ceaselessly changing. If I had a spiritual teacher it would be Laozi.'[68] Moreover, by reprising his abstract style of the second half of the 1980s and early 1990s — remotivated to some degree by the complications of a maturing technique — Yu had effectively performed the eternal return represented by his chosen *yuan* motif.

The second of the landmark exhibitions within the PRC to include works by Yu after 2002 is *Yiban*, the artist's first one-person exhibition in Beijing, which was staged at the city's recently opened Yuan Space between 23 June and 7 September 2013. This exhibition, which had a distinctly valedictory tone during the year of Yu's seventieth birthday, comprised paintings selected from all of the series produced by Yu since 1973. Most prominently displayed, however, were Yu's abstract paintings; an almost certainly intentional affirmation of the artist's circular development. The room at Yuan Space containing Yu's Political Pop and Foreign Mao's paintings was open to visitors during the exhibition's private view, but only accessible throughout the rest of the exhibition's run by special request, a testimony to the continuing challenge to established political authority within the PRC posed by the paintings in question. Wide-ranging discussion by and among specialists has been legal within the PRC since the acceptance of Deng's reforms, including of matters that challenge established orthodoxy. Exposure of thinking and practice that might be understood to challenge the authority of the CCP or undermine the integrity of the Chinese nation-state to a wider public is, however, still heavily circumscribed.

In surveying the serial changes of style and content enacted by Yu through his mature practice as a painter since the mid-1980s, we see not only an encompassing circular trajectory related to his abstract paintings but also within that trajectory other repetitions, principally in relation to appropriations of imagery from the time of the Cultural Revolution. What is more, those changes can be understood to have been constantly negotiated and renegotiated against the backcloth of rapidly shifting material and discursive conditions within the PRC after the ending there of the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign in 1984. Indeed, if we reach back to include Yu's post-impressionist works after 1973, what becomes apparent is that each of Yu's successive styles occupies an indeterminate position that plays uncertainly across shifting bounds of localized ideological acceptability in a manner that constantly presses the limits of convention without ever definitively transgressing them, and that mitigates felt artistic imperatives towards self-expression within the disciplining as well as enabling possibilities held out by prevailing discourses. Within the context of a persistently authoritarian Chinese nation-state, such a strategy is not simply pragmatic but — as events relating to the detention of Ai Weiwei attest — effectively the only one available to artists wishing to establish a sustained artistic-critical practice.

Towards a Theorization of Yu Youhan's Paintings

IN THE FINAL SECTION OF THIS ESSAY I SHALL attempt to theorize Yu's painting with reference to the biographical attention to shifting material and discursive conditions set out in the previous three. In doing so I shall mobilize and adapt two theoretical concepts appropriated from Hal Foster's critical *fin-de-siècle* appraisal of the western avant-gardes, *The Return to the Real: the avant-garde at the end of the century* (1996).

The first of these concepts is that of *parallax*, which, as Foster makes clear, signifies 'the apparent displacement of an object caused by the actual movement of its observer.' In *The Return of the Real* Foster deploys this concept to underscore 'both that our framings of the past depend on our positions in the present and that our positions are defined by such framings' as well as to shift 'the terms of those definitions away from a logic of avant-gardist transgression toward a model of deconstructive (dis) placement, which is far more appropriate to contemporary practices (where the turn from interstitial "text" to institutional "frame" is pronounced).'[69] In the context of the analysis of Yu's painting put forward here, the concept of parallax will be extended — in light of contemporary concerns with regard

to artistic social engagement and emerging discourses related to contemporaneity — not only to the relationship between artistic practice and wider material and discursive circumstances beyond the notional limits of art world institutions, but also, crucially, to differing international and autochthonous cultural outlooks traversing the geo-political boundaries of the PRC. Here, it will be argued that the observed position of Yu's painting shifts when viewed from differing cultural as well as material and discursively informed positions, and that its operative critical significance is therefore both contingent upon and refracted by differences in socio-economic, cultural and political context.

The second of the concepts appropriated from Foster is that of *deferred* action. In *The Return of the Real* Foster draws upon Sigmund Freud's notion — signified in the original German by the term *nachträglichkeit* — that 'an event is registered as traumatic only through a later event that recodes it retroactively, in deferred action', to propose that 'the significance of avant-garde events is produced in an analogous way, through a complex relay of anticipation and reconstruction.'[70] Here the same notion will be adapted to the particular circumstances of the development of Yu's mature painting as part of the re-emergence of avant-garde art in China after the death of Mao, which, it shall be argued, involves three significant instances of deferred action: two related to the short-lived manifestation of an indigenous avant-garde in China during the early twentieth century, and another related to the events of the Cultural Revolution; each of which is recoded retroactively in Yu's painting as traumatic.

Foster's principle stated intention in bringing the concepts of parallax and deferred action together in *The Return of the Real* is to 'refashion the cliché not only of the neo-avant-garde as merely redundant of the historical avant-garde, but also of the postmodern as only belated in relation to the modern.'[71] In the context of this analysis of Yu's painting the intention is to deploy that same pairing in an adapted form to refashion not only the cliché of Chinese contemporary art as merely redundant of western(ized) modernist, postmodernist and contemporary art, but in addition to theorize the multiple and shifting significances of Chinese contemporary art in relation to differing material and discursive contexts within and outside the PRC acting both in relation to the present and retroactively. Suspended here — *contra* national-essentialist arguments associated with the concept of contemporaneity — will, however, be any notion that the meaning of Chinese contemporary art can be limited definitively to any singular context, either spatially (synchronically) or historically (diachronically).

Foster's combining of parallax and deferred action is itself informed strongly by analogous concepts related to the Derridean term *différance*; that is to say the movement of differing-deferring between signs as a locus of the possibility of meaning. In this regard Foster's use of parallax resonates, as he himself indicates, with *différance* as the linguistic condition of deconstructive recontextualization and remotivation; and that of deferred action with Derrida's concept of 'trace-structure', whereby each sign across an unfolding fabric of signification is, by dint of deferral, shot through with the traces of all others and where the traces of past instances of signification are made continually open to recontextualization and remotivation by those to come.[72] The notion of trace-structure also informs Derrida's upholding of a historical relay of anticipation and reconstruction in *Specters of Marx: the state of the debt, the work of mourning and the new international* (1994), which re-envisions communism allegorically through Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a *spectre* that '[a]fter the end of history' — posited by neo-liberals in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall — 'comes by coming back (revenant), it figures *both* a dead man who comes back and a ghost whose expected return repeats itself, again and again.'[73] The analytical-theoretical position adopted here is thus one that remains inflected throughout — albeit in an allegorized form via Foster — by Derridean theory and practice at some variance from a recent counter-deconstructivist turn to materialist and essentialist discourses on contemporary art.

As I have demonstrated throughout this essay, there are significant grounds for interpreting Yu's painting from a postmodernist postructuralist perspective. As indicated with reference to paintings by Richter (fig. 29), Yu's output as a whole involves a range of contrasting styles, which, because of their evident indebtedness to pre-existing western and Chinese models, may be interpreted as a series of appropriative pastiches suspending the authority/aura of painting while upholding the possibility

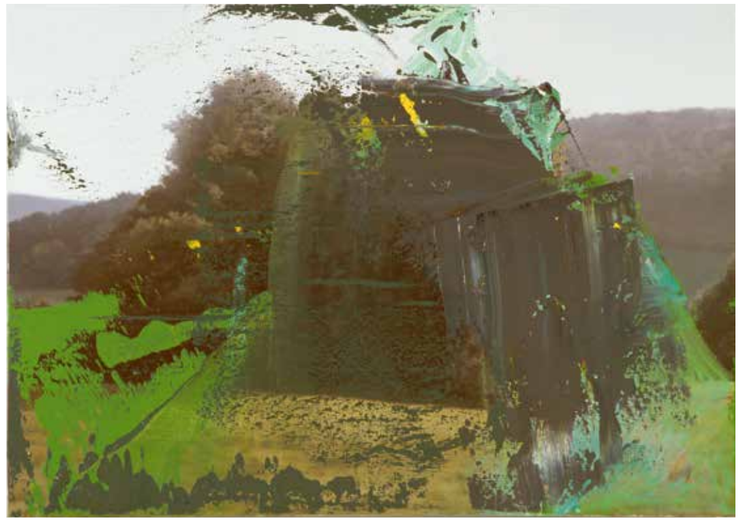


Fig. 29

Gerhard Richter. *Clump of Trees*. 1987. Oil on canvas. 72 x 102 cm. Courtesy of Atelier Richter, Cologne.

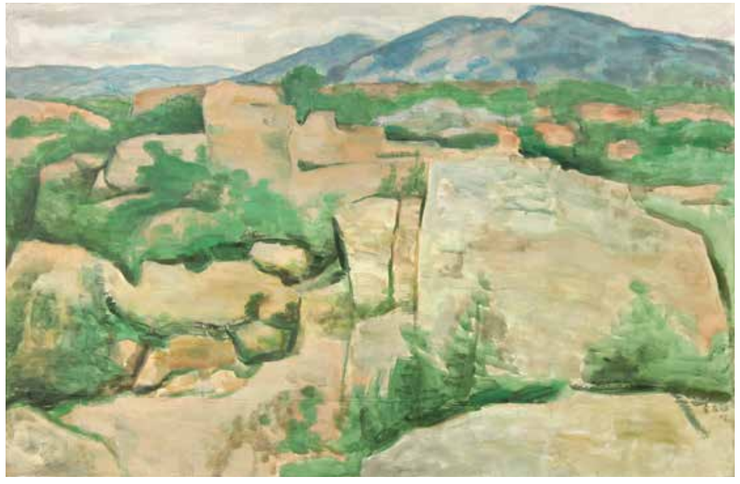


Fig. 30

Yu Youhan. *Yimeng Mountain 14*. 2005.
Acrylic on canvas. 100 x 150 cm.

of its continuation under the seemingly oppressive weight of history. Moreover, Yu's Political Pop, Ah! Us!, Yimeng Mountains (fig. 30) and Foreign Maos series all involve conspicuous appropriations and graftings of images and styles commensurate with a poststructuralist reading of collage-montage as a locus for deconstructive practice. As previously indicated, Yu's appropriation of western painterly techniques and styles may also be viewed through the lens of post-colonialist discourse as a deconstructivist intervention not only on the supposed authority of western artistic modernism as an internationally applicable aspect of progressive modernity, but also by extension asymmetrical relations of West-East dominance inscribed within western colonialism-imperialism.

When viewed in relation to the particularity of localized conditions of cultural production and reception within the PRC, however, the significance of Yu's painting shifts considerably. In this relation it is evident that Yu's intentions are by no means entirely congruent with deconstructivist critique. Not only do statements by Yu persistently uphold the integrity of painterly practice as a locus of stylistic synthesis and autonomous aesthetic experience, those related initially to his circular abstracts and later to his entire oeuvre reinforce that position through an appeal to the harmonizing metaphysics of traditional Daoist thought and practice — an appeal whose positing of a continual and unresolved interaction between apparent opposites has formal, though by no means definitive, similarities to the non-rationalism of Derridean deconstructivism. While such an approach might be aligned from a postructuralist-postmodernist perspective with the notion of a resistant strategic essentialism, that alignment is significantly problematized by the absence of any discernible irony on Yu's part; an absence that also problematizes any settled interpretation of Yu's painting as grand postmodernist pastiche. Equally, such metaphysical assertions remain eminently deconstructible, thereby rendering their status as definite grounds for interpreting Yu's work very much under erasure.

While authorial intention cannot be taken as an outright determinant of textual meaning, the status of Yu's desire to uphold the integrity and autonomy of painting as a critical resistance to dominant discourses both within and outside the PRC should nevertheless be acknowledged. Outside the PRC that desire cuts very much against the grain of the latent imperialism of western(ized) postmodernist discourses. Within the PRC it serves to stake out notional distance between painterly practice and the persistently disciplining effects of locally dominant governmental discourses on the role of art in relation to society and politics.

To problematize matters still further, it is by no means clear that Yu distances himself entirely from a still notionally dominant Maoist conception of art as a reflection of the reality of the masses and as a support to CCP strategy within the PRC. Although Yu uses what might be seen as deconstructivist means to remotivate the significance of the Maoist era in his Political Pop, Ah! Us! and Foreign Maos series, he nevertheless does so by upholding Maoism retroactively as a positive focus for progressive social harmony and self-actualization. In that sense, Yu's various Pop paintings can be understood to shuttle between revolutionary teleological and deconstructivist outlooks.

Also germane to this point is the persistence of realism within China as a formative principle of modern post-imperial artistic production. As Carol Lu and Liu Ding have argued[74], modern post-imperial artistic production within the PRC is predicated not on a fundamental questioning of the subjects and means of artistic representation, as is the case in a western post-Enlightenment context, but on an instituting of realism as a central tenet of artistic modernity, first promulgated by the educator Cai Yuanpei in the immediate aftermath of World War I. In the context of post-imperial China, this embracing of realism was intended to subtend the aristocratic abstraction characteristic of traditional literati painting in a manner that proceeds in an almost diametrically opposed fashion to the tendency of the western avant-gardes and post-avant-gardes towards subjectivist iconoclasm. Much of Yu's Pop-related output can be understood to occupy a position sympathetic to the wider realist tendency within modern Chinese painting. In Lu and Liu's view, realism constitutes the abiding principle in relation to which all modern Chinese painting should be interpreted. This one-sided argument is, however, significantly problematized by the formal means which Yu and other contemporary artists of the post-Mao era have used as part of their artistic practice — means that are inescapably open to interpretation from a postmodernist poststructuralist perspective as deconstructivist. Yet again the significance of Yu's paintings can be understood to shuttle between differing discursive outlooks.

Indeterminate positionings of this kind are very much characteristic of cultural production within the PRC after the ending of the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign in 1984. Although the lifting of the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign ushered in a tolerance for formal diversity in line with the opening up of space for entrepreneurial activity away from overweening CCP control as part of Deng's reforms, it also involved the handing down of 'vague directives' and laws that instituted a pervasive (panoptical) self-surveillance on exactly where the uncertain ideological limits of artistic production might lie. Even though legal statutes put in place within the PRC during the 1980s expressly forbid in general terms any form of public cultural expression that might be understood to undermine the authority of the CCP and/or the integrity of the Chinese nation-state, there are no specific indications of what might constitute such infringements in practice; thereby leaving interpretations of transgression very much in the bureaucratic control of the CCP.[75]

What is more, inherent to the overall shape of Yu's output is another mode of revolutionary action, that of an eventual return to the circular abstract style that initiated his career as a mature painter in the mid-1980s; within the compass of which are numerous other returns and recapitulations related to representations of Mao and the Cultural Revolution. In this case revolution viewed as cyclical return signals an evident desire on Yu's part — also more generally part of avant-garde (*qianwei*) art within the PRC during the 1980s and 1990s — to assert freedom of artistic self-expression away from any sort of direct engagement with disciplining political discourses. Thus Yu's overall output emerges as a constant grand shuttling within the localized discursive contexts of the PRC between resistant intervention and detachment — much along the lines of the constant shifts in critical proximity and distance that mark the development of avant-garde and post-avant-garde art outside the PRC.

A comprehensive evaluation of the relevance of Badiou's reassertion of a neo-Platonic philosophy of art to an

Fig. 31

Yu Youhan. *Mao Waving (Blue)*. 1992.
Acrylic on canvas. 122 x 92 cm.

understanding of Yu's painting in particular and Chinese contemporary art in general[76] lies outside of the scope of this essay. However, one might venture the first thought that Badiou's well-nigh Greenbergian requirement that politically progressive art be both 'evental' — that is to say historically innovative — and 'true' to the specialized developmental trajectory of artistic practices does not sit wholly easily with a granular analysis of the relationship between Yu's work and the diverse contexts of its production and reception. Although Yu's various stylistic recapitulations of pre-existing western models hardly constitute a definitive series of events from a western(ized) postmodernist perspective, as I have argued throughout this essay, within the PRC they can very much be seen to do so. Yu's painting can thus be understood to be both evental and true, but only in a pragmatically relativist sense. One might reverse the argument by drawing attention to the culturally composite nature of western modernism and international postmodernism, which both involve the appropriation and reworking of non-Western attitudes and techniques, including notably in the case of abstraction and Dada, from China and East Asia.[77]

Fig. 32

Yu Youhan. *Mao with Flowers*. 1993.
Acrylic on canvas. 117 x 98 cm.

To summarise, when viewed in respect of the notion of parallax, Yu's painting emerges as a distinctly polysemic object. Although it is possible and indeed convincing to read Yu's painting in parts and as a whole as a locus of deconstructive criticality, such a reading is significantly compromised by a granular attention to the localized conditions of the production and reception of those paintings within the PRC. Within the PRC, Yu's paintings operate critically in relation to authority predominantly — though by no means exclusively — because of assertions of synthetic stylistic integrity and aesthetic autonomy and not because of intended deconstructive effects, which are generally rejected by dominant discourses as an expression of western(ized) cultural imperialism.

At the same time, Yu's embracing of metaphysical Daoist thought and practice as a basis for his painting is very much open to demonstrations of its own deconstruction. Indeed, Yu might not only be accused of unsupportable self-orientalization but, perhaps worse, the bathos of 'Californication' — that is to say, the marshalling of unfounded mysticism in support of a supposedly modern progressive practice. These possible accusations notwithstanding, the stance taken by Yu is a critically viable and apposite one within and outside the PRC, but in each case from differing, though overlapping discursive perspectives. Here it is unnecessary to buy into the absolute veracity of Daoist metaphysics or the universal sustainability of poststructuralist theory and practice — the latter, in any case, comprehends imperfectly its own deconstructability — only the demonstrable critical efficacy, or relative veracity/sustainability, of both under given discursive circumstances. What collapses in the face of this cultural parallax is any ontologically justifiable adherence to the essentialisms promulgated under the cover of emerging discourses related to contemporaneity.

It should not be denied that the translation of Yu's work between differing cultural contexts involves inevitable 'losses' as well as countervailing 'gains' in meaning. Judging whether one reading is more 'authentic' than another depends on what are ultimately unresolvable perceptions of the value of cultural proximity and distance. That having been said, the ineluctable friction between differing cultural outlooks enacted by Yu's painting is arguably open to interpretation as a locus for a continuing multi-lateral criticality, or critical polylogue, with regard to the ideological significance of contemporary artistic production — a critical form of contemporaneity, if you will. Such a view challenges readings of Chinese contemporary art put forward as part of emerging discourses related to contemporaneity by Wu Hung and Gao Minglu that ultimately privilege localized significances within the PRC against deconstructive theory and practice.[78]

With regard to the concept of deferred action, I wish to draw attention to three significant instances of retroactive recoding in Yu's work (there may well be others). The most obvious of these is that of Yu's re-envisioning of the Cultural Revolution decades after the actuality of events through his Political Pop series of paintings. (Figs. 31 and 32) In the immediate aftermath of the high tide of the Cultural Revolution, Yu almost certainly entered a period of post-traumatic shock brought on by prolonged stress and serious illness. The early years of Yu's career as a teacher in Shanghai during the 1970s and 1980s were therefore most

likely a period of recuperation — paralleling that of the wider PRC — during which he was able to develop as a painter away from the ideological constraints and threats held over him as a student in Beijing. At the end of the 1980s within a context of increased liberalization, Yu was thus empowered, both technically and discursively, to engage with the events of the Cultural Revolution by retroactively recoding them through painting. Yu's retroactive recoding of the Cultural Revolution in the context of his Political Pop paintings is by no means directly critical, however. Instead of seeking to represent the Cultural Revolution as a time of violence and suppression — significant aspects of his actual experience of events — he does so as one holding out the promise of a harmonious society and individual self-actualization. Yu can therefore be understood to have registered the events of the Cultural Revolution as traumatic in an obliquely recuperative way by deconstructively remotivating their significance and, as a consequence, productively suspending their negative authority over both himself and, by extension, the PRC. This interpretation is further complicated by calls for the building of a 'harmonious society' by China's former premier Hu Jintao during the early 2000s.

The second instance of retroactive recoding I wish to draw attention to in Yu's work is that of the short-lived flowering of artistic modernism in China during the early twentieth century, the traces of which informed Yu's formative development as a painter. As previously discussed, the immediate aftermath of World War I saw the emergence in China not only of progressive westernized forms of art education, but also artists and art groups whose work looked towards the example of early European modernism. By the late 1950s, as Yu was beginning to develop an interest in painting, artistic modernism in China had all but been erased, first by the debilitating effects of the second Sino-Japanese war and civil conflict between the KMT and the PLA, and then, after 1949, suppressive anti-modernist directives on cultural production handed down by the CCP. Nevertheless, its traces inhered both through the survival of historical publications as well as the artistic practice and memory of individuals, such as Yu's near-neighbour Fan Jiman. Yu's almost certainly therapeutic self-teaching of painting in a post-impressionist manner during the 1970s and his development of abstract styles during the 1980s and beyond are thus open to interpretation as a registering of the loss of artistic modernism in China as traumatic through retroactive negative-productive recoding. In this light, Yu's painting from the 1970s onwards may be viewed as a complex relay of retroactive recodings registering and productively overcoming cumulative instances of cultural trauma in China throughout the twentieth century.

The third instance of retroactive recoding I wish to draw attention to here relates to the breaking with traditional Chinese literati culture that took place as part of the establishment of Republican China after 1911 and which became violently restated during the Cultural Revolution. The registering of this breaking as traumatic is, perhaps, most obvious in relation to Yu's appropriation of Daoist thought and practice, first as a way of theorizing his abstract paintings of the late 1980s and 1990s and later the entirety of his oeuvre as a harmonious reciprocation of opposites. However, it is also registered and recoded by general tendencies within Yu's practice as a painter towards subjectivist aestheticism, which, I wish to argue, may be interpreted convincingly in accordance with changing aesthetic principles established in China alongside the development of literati painting during the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368).

As Li Zehou indicates, the Yuan dynasty was founded by invading Mongolian forces whose advance southwards seriously disrupted the existing social order in China. The resulting collapse of the established Chinese imperial court created a class of displaced scholars — 'men of letters with no official status' — who had formerly been employed in the administration of the state. This displaced literati class became arbiters of aesthetic values attached to landscape painting that had previously been upheld by a now dissolved imperial art academy. The development of literati painting (*wenrenhua*) away from the imperial court lead to a greater emphasis on subjective feeling over formal resemblance that superseded a prior emphasis on harmonious beauty established during the Song dynasty (960-1279), and that gave definition to the general aestheticist trajectory of Chinese landscape painting up until the ending of dynastic rule at the beginning of the twentieth century.[79] As such, literati landscape painting became established as a locus of autonomous moral-aesthetic resistance to governmental authority.

Yu's own general commitment to an autonomous and elegant, or harmoniously beautiful, art — even in relation to his socially engaged Political Pop paintings[80] — as well as, in the specific case of his abstract paintings, towards an aestheticized expression not related to the perception of actual objects[81], resonates strongly with historical literati tendencies in China. It is therefore possible to view Yu's stylistically variegated emphasis on the aesthetic after the realist strictures of the Maoist era as a retroactive recoding of three traumatic moments in Chinese history: the suppression of Chinese tradition during the Cultural Revolution; the interruption of the continuity of literati painting by realism and modernism during the early twentieth century; and the initial trauma of displacement that resulted in the emergence of literati landscape painting during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In relation to all of which, Yu's oeuvre may be theorized as a series of attempts by a contemporaneously (dis-) placed literatus to perpetuate the practice of painting critically in the face of shifting material and discursive circumstances; not only those habitually discussed in immediate relation to western(ized) postmodernism, but others as part of a much longer history of moral-cultural resistance to adverse authority in the context of China.

Notes

1 Mao Zedong, 'Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art', in *Selected Works*, Vol. III, (1942), 86.

2 Anna Marie Sophie Conrad, ed., *Yu Youhan: first solo exhibition in Beijing*, exh. cat., (Beijing: Yuan Space, 2013), 158.

3 Artnet (http://www.artnet.com/artists/; accessed 7 January 2015).

4 See, for example, Li Xianting, 'Apathy and Deconstruction in Post '89 Art: Analysing the Trends of "Cynical Realism" and "Political Pop"', in Wu, ed., *Contemporary Chinese Art*, 157-66; Stacy Brechbill, 'China's Political Pop Art', in *Art Asia Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Tyler Graphics, 1992); and Francesca dal Lago et al., *Writing on the Wall: Chinese New Realism and Avant-garde Art in the Eighties and Nineties* (Rotterdam: Groninger Museum, 2008).

5 Paul Gladston, *Contemporary Art in Shanghai: Conversations with Seven Chinese Artists* (Hong Kong: Blue Kingfisher-Timezone 8, 2011), 32.

6 Gladston, *Contemporary Art in Shanghai*, 30.

7 Gerhard Richter cited in Peter Fischer, Sören Engblom and Iris Müller-Westermann, *In the Power of Painting* (Zurich: Scalo, 2000), 86.

8 Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, ed., *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1992), 211-244.

9 Peter Osborne, 'Painting Negation', in Andreas C Papadakis, ed., *Art & Design* 25 (1992), 32-43.

10 Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting', in Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison, eds., *Modern Art and Modernism: a critical anthology* (London: Paul Chapman Publishing, 1988), 5-10.

11 See Ad Reinhardt, 'Art as Art', in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory 1900-1990: an anthology of changing ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) 806-809.

12 See, for example, Donald Judd, 'Specific Objects', in Harrison and Wood, eds., *Art in Theory*, 809-813; and Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', in Harrison and Wood, eds., *Art in Theory*, 822-834.

13 Peter Fischer, 'Introduction in Three Words', in Peter Fischer, Sören Engblom and Iris Müller-Westermann, *In the Power of Painting* (Zurich: Scalo, 2000), 13.

14 See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso 1991), 16-19.

15 See Craig Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse: towards a theory of Postmodernism', in Harrison and Wood, eds., *Art in Theory*, 1051-1060.

16 Gregory L. Ulmer, 'The Object of Post-Criticism', in Hal Foster, ed., Postmodern Culture (London: Pluto Press, 1985), 83-110.

17 Donald Preziosi, ed. *The Art of Art History: a Critical Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 397.

18 For a relatively early example of this line of argument see John Roberts, ed., *Art Has No History!: the making and unmaking of modern art* (London: Verso, 1994), 18.

19 See, for example, Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee, eds., *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2008); and Paul Gladston, 'Somewhere (and Nowhere) between Modernity and Tradition: Towards a Critique of International and Indigenous Perspectives on the Significance of Contemporary Chinese Art', *Tate Papers* 21 (Spring 2014), no page numbers given (http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/issue-21; accessed 7 January 2014).

20 See, for example, Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

21 For a critical discussion of the rise of neo-Confucianism and its impact on cultural production and reception within the PRC since the mid-1990s, see Gladston, 'Somewhere (and Nowhere) between Modernity and Tradition'.

22 See, for example, Gao Minglu, '"Particular Time, Specific Space, My Truth": Total modernity in Chinese contemporary Art', in Smith, Enwezor and Condee, eds., *Antinomies of Art and Culture*, 133-164.

23 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: les Presses du réel, 1998).

24 See Claire Fontaine's website (http://www.clairefontaine.ws/bio.html; accessed 9 March 2015).

25 For a measure of the esteem in which Richter is still held by the international art world, see Corinna Belz, dir., *Gerhard Richter Painting* (Soda Pictures, 2011).

26 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

27 See, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Translator's Preface', in Jacques Derrida, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak trans., *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins university Press, 1976), ix-lxxxvii.

28 Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, (Oxford UK and Cambridge USA: Blackwell, 1983), 148.

29 Anna Marie Sophie Conrad, ed., *Yu Youhan: first solo exhibition in Beijing*, exh. cat., (Beijing: Yuan Space, 2013).

30 Paul Gladston, *Contemporary Art in Shanghai: Conversations with Seven Chinese Artists* (Hong Kong: Blue Kingfisher-Timezone 8, 2011).

31 Paul Gladston, 'The World Belongs to You: an Interview with Yu Youhan', in *Artworld* (*Yishu shijie*) 232 (2009), 70-73.

32 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: a selection* (London: Routledge 1977), 1-7.

33 See, for example, Jacques Derrida, 'What is a "Relevant" Translation?', *Critical Enquiry* 27 (2) (1972), 174-200; and Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.

34 Some passages in this book draw upon and in a few cases adapt others first published in Paul Gladston, *Contemporary Chinese Art: a critical history* (London: Reaktion, 2014).

35 Paul Gladston, *Contemporary Chinese Art: a critical history* (London: Reaktion, 2014), 54-55.

36 Ralph Crozier, 'Post-Impressionists in Pre-War Shanghai: The Juelanshe (Storm Society) and the Fate of Modernism in Republican China', in Elaine O'Brien, Evelyn Nicodemus, Melissa Chiu, Benjamin Genocchio, Mary K. Coffey and Roberto Tejada, eds., *Modern Art in Africa, Asia and Latin America; an Introduction to Global Modernisms* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 254-271.

37 For a concise discussion of traditional Chinese painterly aesthetics, see Wang Yao-t'ing, *Looking at Chinese Painting: a comprehensive guide to the philosophy, technique and history of Chinese painting* (Tokyo: Nigensha Publishing, 1996); also see Li Zehou, *The Path of Beauty: a study of Chinese aesthetics* (Beijing: Morning Glory Publishers, 1999).

38 Wang Chunchen, *Art Intervenes in Society: a new artistic relationship* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2010), 16.

39 Paul Gladston, 'Answering the Question: what is the Chinese Avant-Garde? Zhai Zhenming in Conversation with Paul Gladston', in *Eyeline, Contemporary Visual Arts* 78/79, 90-92.

40 In 1979, Yu reportedly saw and was strongly impressed by an exhibition of prints of European impressionist paintings held at a cultural centre in Shanghai. See Carol Lu, 'Yu Youhan', in *Frieze* 159 (http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/yu-youhan/; accessed 20 February 2015).

41 Gao Minglu, *The No Name: A History of a Self-Exiled Avant-garde* (Guangxi: Guanxi Normal University Press, 2007).

42 Martina Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare: the Chinese Avant-Garde, 1979-1989. A Semiotic Analysis* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2003), 23-24.

43 In 1985, Yu reportedly attended an exhibition of the work of the painter Zhao Wuji (Zao Wou-ki) staged at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou. See Carol Lu, 'Yu Youhan', in *Frieze* 159 (http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/yu-youhan/; accessed 20 February 2015). After relocating to Paris in 1948, Zhao developed a substantial body of abstract paintings combining western modernist and traditional Chinese idioms. Zhao visited the US in 1957, declaring a desire to learn more about Pop Art. Zhao's work impacted strongly on Yu's early development as an abstract painter and, perhaps, his later appropriation of Pop Art.

44 For a concise discussion of the conceptual pairing of yin-yang, see Zhang Dainan, ed., Edmund Ryden, trans., Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press and New Haven CT and London: Yale University Press), 83-94.

45 Conrad, ed., *Yu Youhan*, 114.

46 Conrad, ed., *Yu Youhan*, 114.

47 Wu Guanzhong, '*Huihua de xingshi mei*' ['On the Beauty of Form in Painting'/'Formalist Aesthetics in Painting'], *Meishu zazhi* (Art), v (1979), 33–5; '*Guanya chouxiang mei*' ['Concerning the Beauty of the Abstract'], *Meishu zazhi* (Art), x (1980), 37–9; '*Neirong jueding xingshi*' ['Form is Decided by Content'], *Meishu zazhi* (Art), iii (1981), 52-4; for an English translation of Wu's essay 'Formalist Aesthetics in Painting' see Wu Hung, ed., with Peggy Wang, Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 14-17.

48 See Fei Dawei, ed., *'85 New Wave: the birth of Chinese contemporary art* (Beijing: Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, 2007).

49 Zhu Ye, 'Beijing Theorists' Reactions to the Art of Robert Rauschenberg', in Wu Hung, ed., with Peggy Wang, *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 42-45.

50 Conrad, ed., *Yu Youhan*, 115-16.

51 See, for example, Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912), in which Kandinsky promulgates the idea of the cultural advancement of humanity in relation to a spiritual pyramid — at the apex of which stands the work of great artists — as well as the 'inner necessity' of an efficient correspondence between formal composition and spiritual feeling. In Kandinsky's view the latter can be understood to ground the artist's right to unlimited freedom in contrast to the arbitrariness of outright expressive licence.

52 Edward Lucie-Smith, 'Yu Youhan' (2006) (http://www.shanghartgallery.com/galleryarchive/texts/id/169; accessed 7 January 2015)

53 Conrad, ed., *Yu Youhan*, 116.

54 Gladston, 'The World Belongs to You', 71.

55 Tang Xiaobing, 'The Anxiety of Everyday Life in Post-Revolutionary China', in Ben Highmore, ed., *The Everyday Life Reader*, (London: Routledge, 2002), 125-35.

56 Conrad, ed., *Yu Youhan*, 157.

57 Conrad, ed., *Yu Youhan*, 157.

58 Gladston, *Contemporary Art in Shanghai*, 32.

59 For a discussion of the relationship between the implicit/latent (*yin*) and explicit/outstanding (*hsiu*) in relation to traditional Chinese aesthetics, see Mazhar Hussain and Robert Wilkinson, eds., *The Pursuit of Comparative Aesthetics: an Interface between East and West* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 5-6. The authors used the now largely redundant Wade-Giles system in referring to 'hsiu'.

60 The Yimeng Mountains series was produced in Shanghai based in part on photographs taken by Yu in situ. Yu's combination of stylistic approaches — including that of Paul Cézanne — makes conscious reference to the work of the late nineteenth-and early twentieth-century Chinese painter Huang Binhong, whose 'modern' use of traditional shan-shui techniques was compared to the paintings of Cézanne by the critic FouLei. See Claire Roberts, *Friendship in Art: Fou Lei and Huang Binhong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010).

61 Conrad, ed., *Yu Youhan*, 135.

62 This formal connection was drawn to the author's attention by Lynne Howarth-Gladston.

63 Yu Youhan, *Yu Youhan: landscape of Yimeng Shan*, exh. cat., (Shanghai: ShanghArt Gallery 2004), no page nos. given.

64 Yu Youhan, *Yu Youhan: landscape of Yimeng Shan.*

65 Conrad, ed., *Yu Youhan*, 159.

66 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 16-19.

67 Unpublished statement Yu Youhan [1985], 'Beginning with Conception', in Fei Dawei, *'85 New Wave: the birth of Chinese contemporary art* (Beijing: Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, 2007), 60.

68 Yu Youhan, 'Yu Youhan: flow and embodiment', *Leap* (February 2011), 144.

69 Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: the avant-garde at the end of the century* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1996), xii.

70 Foster, *The Return of the Real*, xii.

71 Foster, *The Return of the Real*, xii-xiii.

72 Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982), 1-27.

73 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: the state of the debt, the work of mourning, and the new international* (London: Routledge, 1994), 10.

74 Carol Lu and Liu Ding, 'From the Issue of Art to the Issue of Position: The Echoes of Socialist Realism, Part I', in *E-Flux* (http://www.e-flux.com/journal/from-the-issue-of-art-to-the-issue-of-position-the-echoes-of-socialist-realism-part-i/; accessed 27 February 2015), and Carol Lu and Liu Ding, 'From the Issue of Art to the Issue of Position: The Echoes of Socialist Realism, Part II', in *E-Flux* (http://www.e-flux.com/journal/from-the-issue-of-art-to-the-issue-of-position-the-echoes-of-socialist-realism-part-ii/; accessed 27 February 2015).

75 Rebecca Catching, 'The New Face of Censorship: state control and the visual arts in Shanghai, 2008-2011', in *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 11 (2+3), 231-249.

76 Colin Wright, 'Badiou in China?: re-translations of French Maoism and inaesthetics', in *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 1 (2+3), 141-156.

77 Gladston, *Contemporary Chinese Art*, 47-49.

78 Paul Gladston, 'Problematizing the New Cultural Separatism: critical reflections on contemporaneity and the theorizing of contemporary Chinese art', in Elizabeth Childs-Johnson and Ying-ying Lai, eds., *Modern China Studies* 19 (1) (2012), 195-270.

79 Li Zehou, Gong Lizeng trans., *The Path of Beauty — a study of Chinese aesthetics*, (Beijing: Morning Glory Publishers, 1999), 224-231.

80 Conrad, ed., *Yu Youhan*, 158.

81 Conrad, ed., *Yu Youhan*, 116.

Post-Impressionist Works

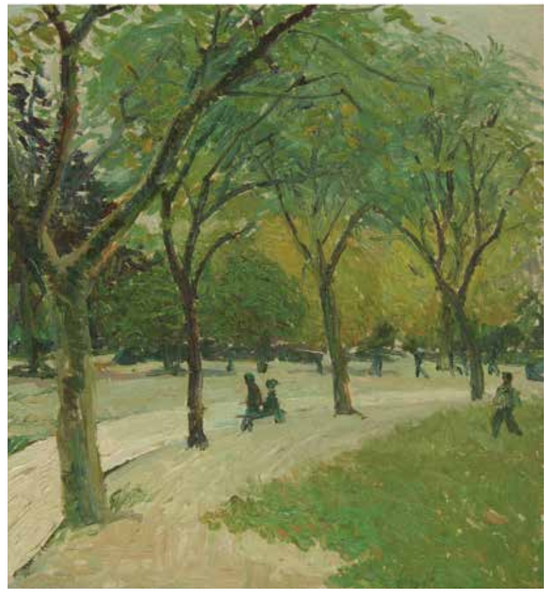
PLATE 1. *Li Village*, 1973

(top) PLATE 2. *Li Village Primary School*, 1973

(bottom) PLATE 3. *Li Village Primary School II*, 1973

(top) PLATE 4. *Huating Road*, 1973-1977

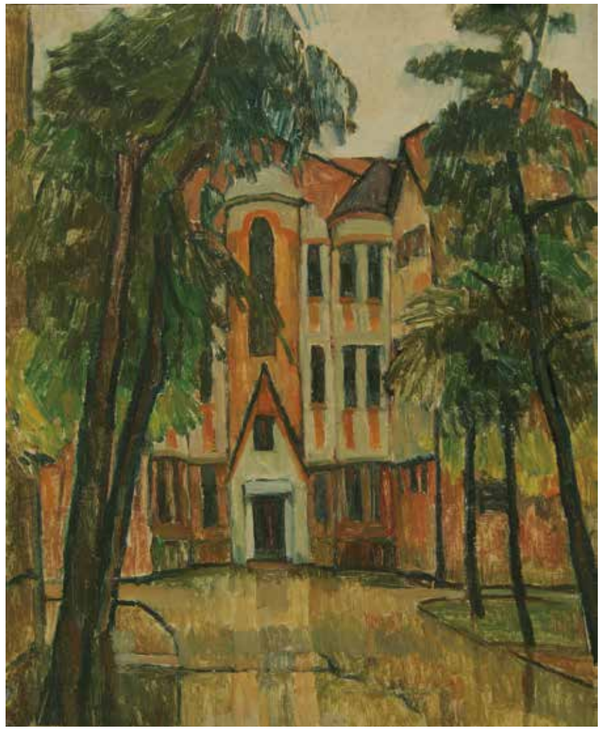
(bottom) PLATE 5. *Gao An Road II*, 1980



(top) PLATE 6. *Xiangyang Park*, 1977

(centre) PLATE 7. *Kangping Road*, 1977

(bottom) PLATE 8. *Gao An Road I*, 1979



(top) PLATE 9. *Fuxing Middle Road*. 1975

(centre) PLATE 10. *Life Study*. 1981

(bottom) PLATE 11. *Fuxing Middle Road, Street Scene*. 1983

(top) PLATE 12. *Still Life*. 1979

(bottom) PLATE 13. *Wuxing Road 1*. 1980

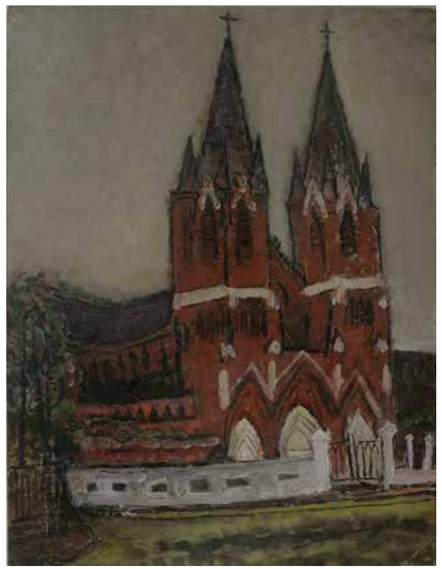
(top) PLATE 14. *Lushan Landscape*. 1980

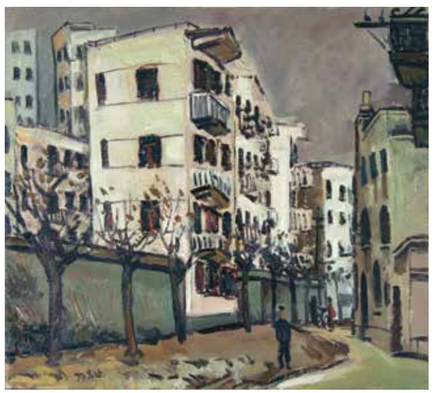
(centre) PLATE 15. *Dalian Children's Park*. 1983

(bottom) PLATE 16. *Weigang*. 1979-1989

(top) PLATE 17. *Hengshan Hotel*. 1982

(bottom) PLATE 18. *Jinjiang Street*. 1982

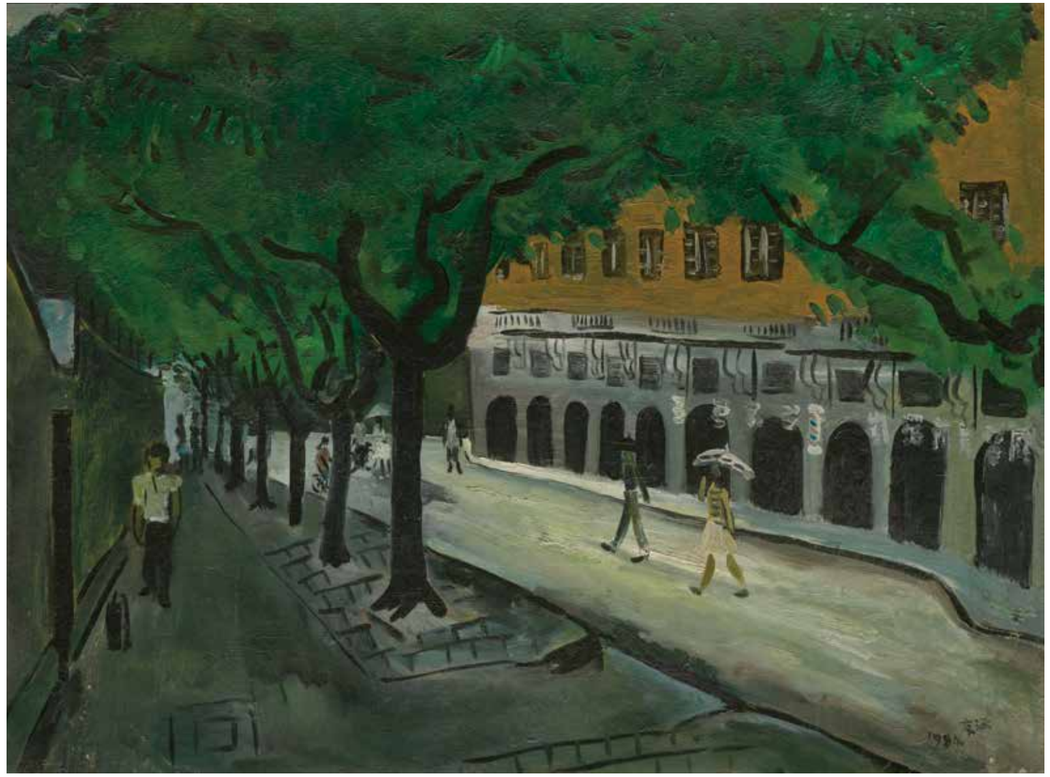




(top) PLATE 19. *Wukang Mansion*. 1983

(bottom left) PLATE 20. *Xujiahui Cathedral*. 1982

(bottom right) PLATE 21. *Wuxing Road New Village*. 1979



(top) PLATE 22. *Huaihai Middle Road*. 1984

(bottom) PLATE 23. *Waibaidu Bridge*. 1984

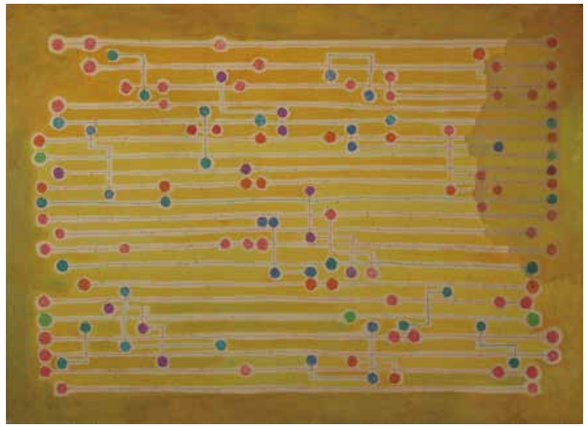
Early Abstracts

(top) PLATE 24. *Abstract 1982-3*. 1982

(bottom) PLATE 25. *Abstract after Han dynasty wall painting*. 1983

PLATE 26. *Autumn in Beijing*. 1980

PLATE 27. *Abstract 1982-21*, 1982



(top) PLATE 28. *Abstract 1983-4*, 1983

(bottom) PLATE 29. *Abstract 1984-22*, 1984

(top) PLATE 30. *Abstract 1981-4*, 1981

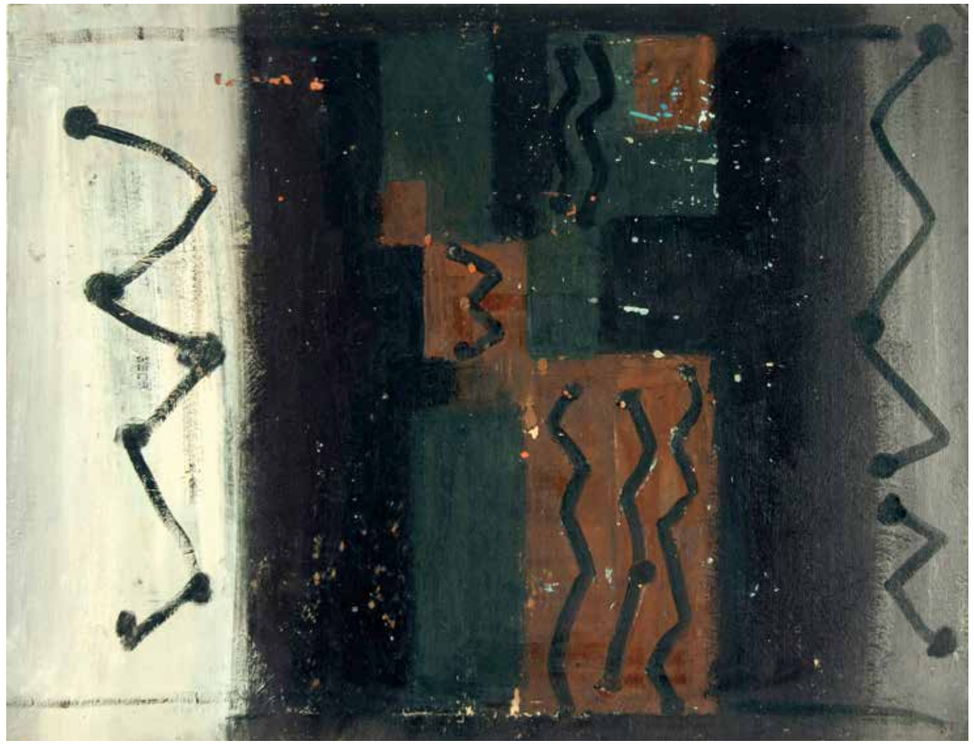
(bottom) PLATE 31. *Abstract 1981-3*, 1981

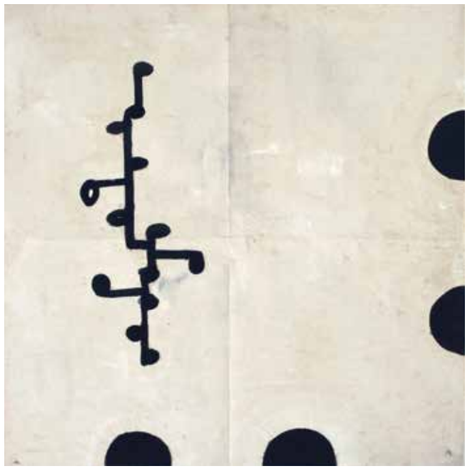
PLATE 32. *Abstract 1982-15*, 1982

PLATE 33. *Abstract 1983-3*, 1983

(top) PLATE 34. *Abstract 1982-11*, 1982

(bottom) PLATE 35. *Abstract 1982-14*, 1982





(top) PLATE 36. *Abstract 1981-2*, 1981

(bottom) PLATE 37. *Abstract 1981-1*, 1981

(top) PLATE 38. *Abstract 1983-9*, 1983

(bottom) PLATE 39. *Abstract 1983-5*, 1983

(top) PLATE 40. *Abstract 1983-18*, 1983

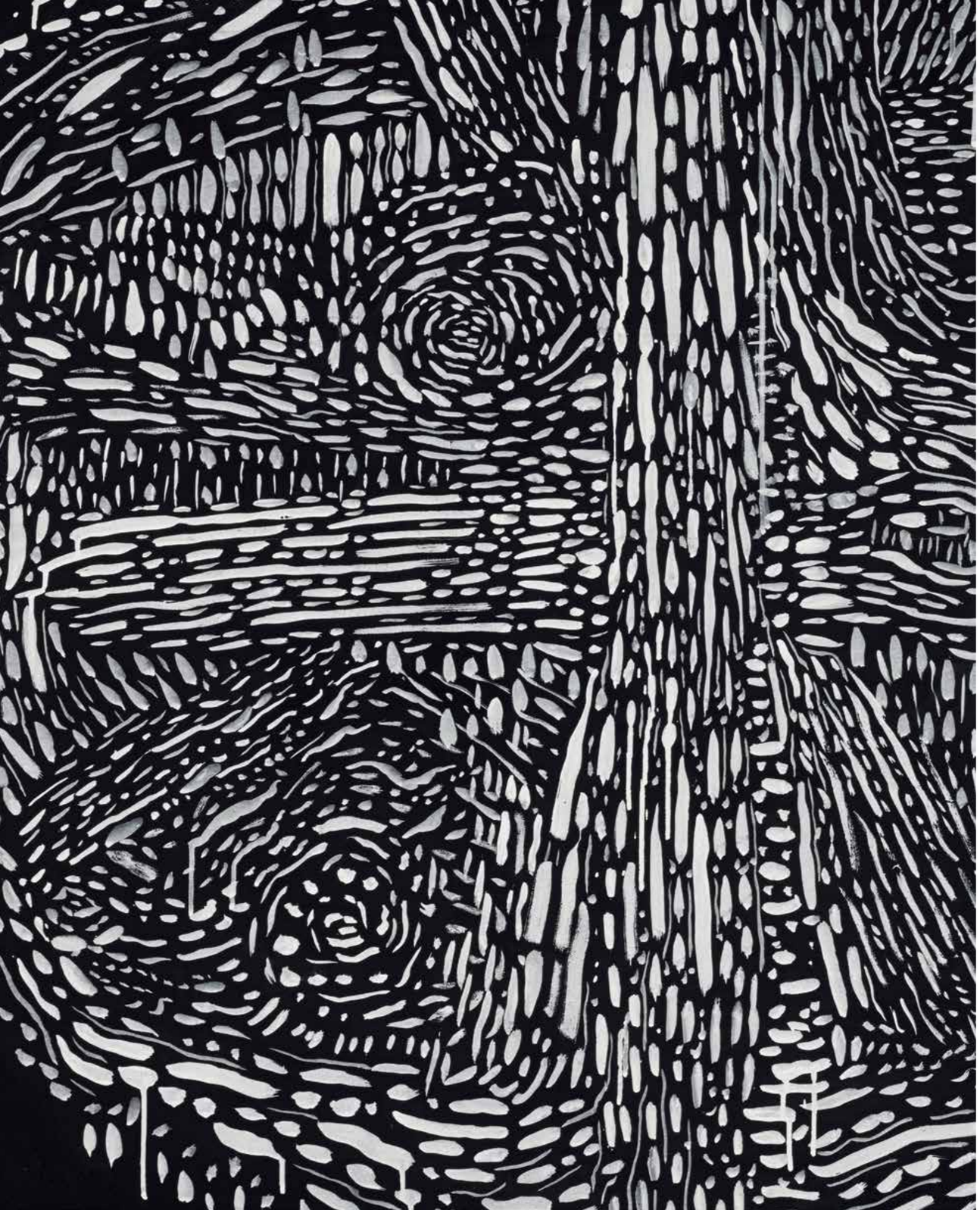
(bottom) PLATE 41. *Abstract 1983-10*, 1983

PLATE 42. *Abstract 1983-22*, 1983

PLATE 43. *Abstract 1983-6*. 1983

(top) PLATE 44. *Abstract 1984-1*. 1984

(bottom) PLATE 45. *Abstract 1984-2*. 1984



Circular Abstracts

PLATE 46. *Circle 1985-3*, 1985

(top) PLATE 47. *Circle 1985-5*, 1985

(bottom) PLATE 48. *White Circle 1985-02*, 1984-1986

(top) PLATE 49. *Circle 1986-31*. 1986

(bottom) PLATE 50. *Circle 1986-6*. 1986

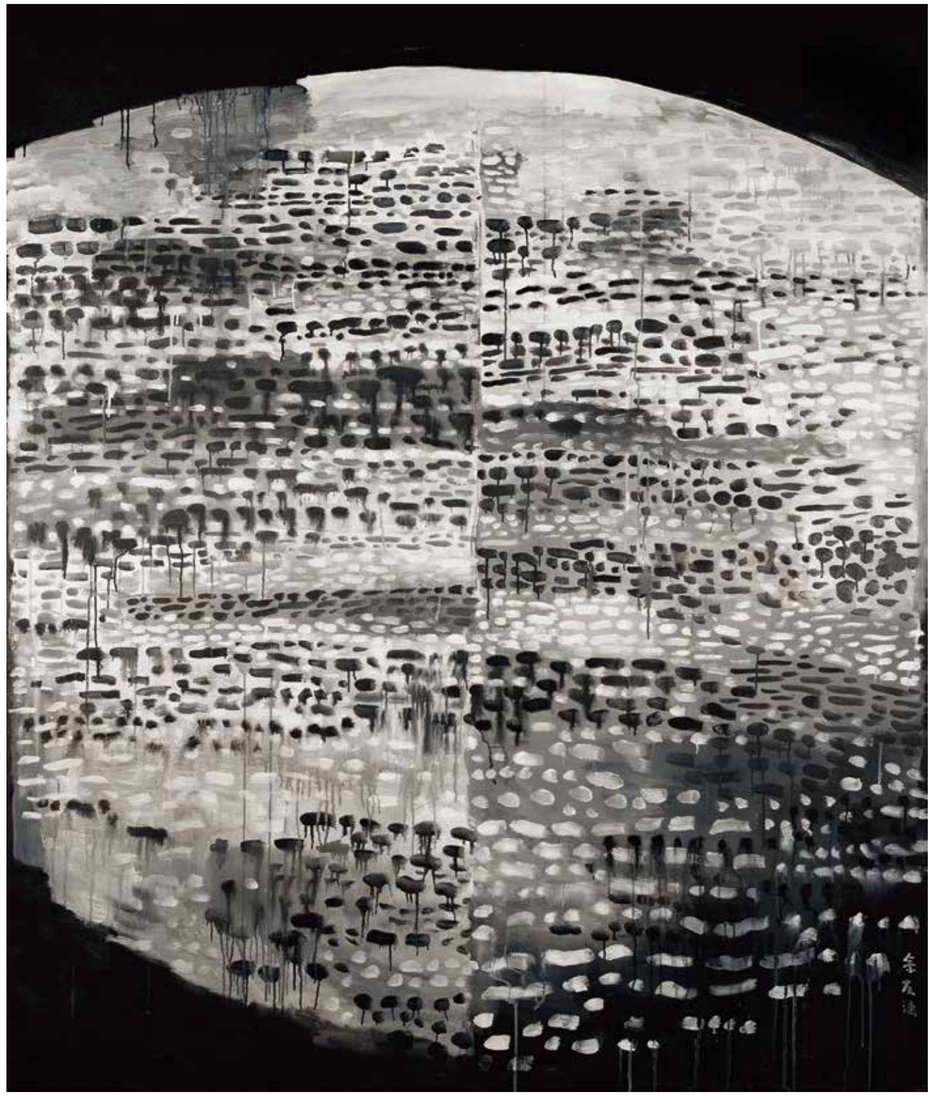


PLATE 51. *Circle 2002-1*. 2002

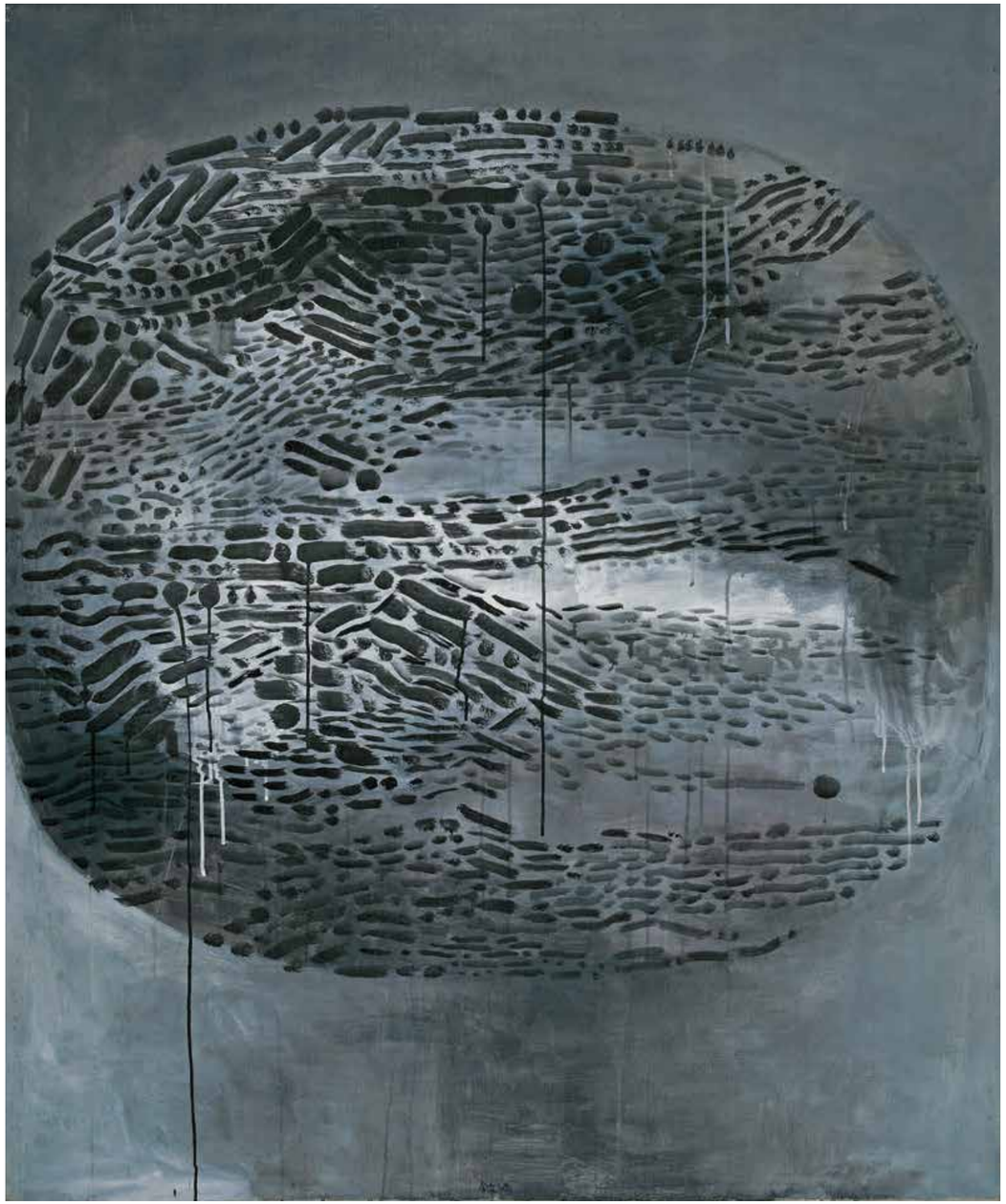
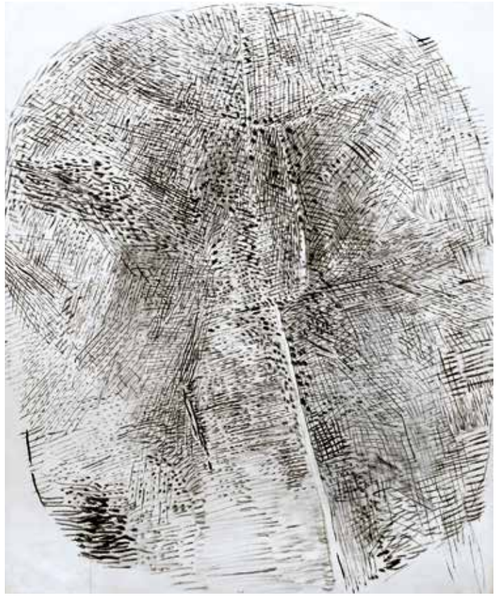


PLATE 52. *Circle 1986-7*, 1986



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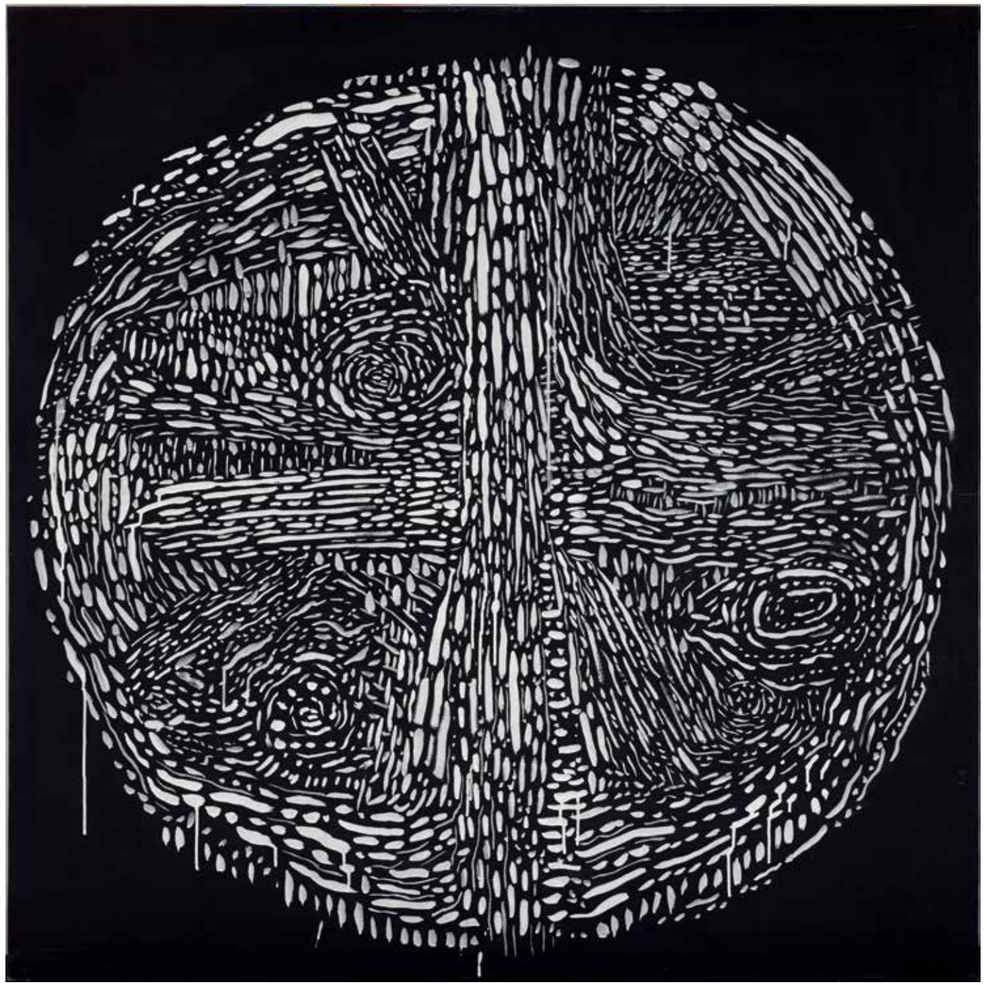

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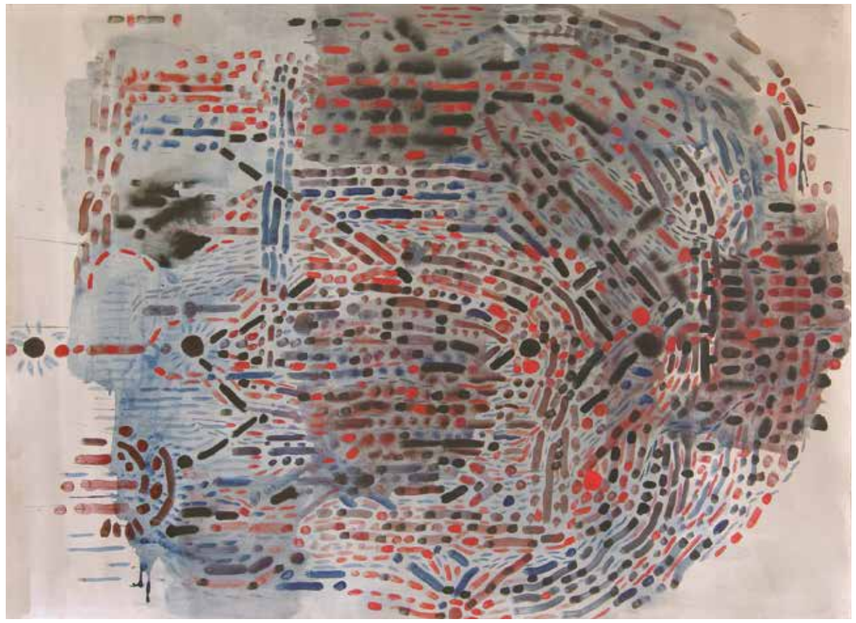

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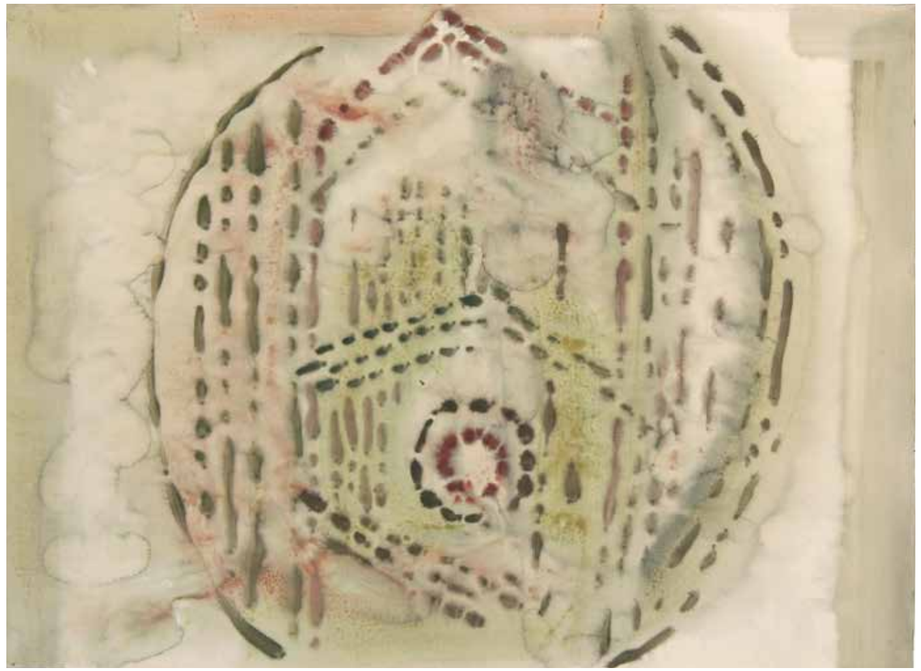

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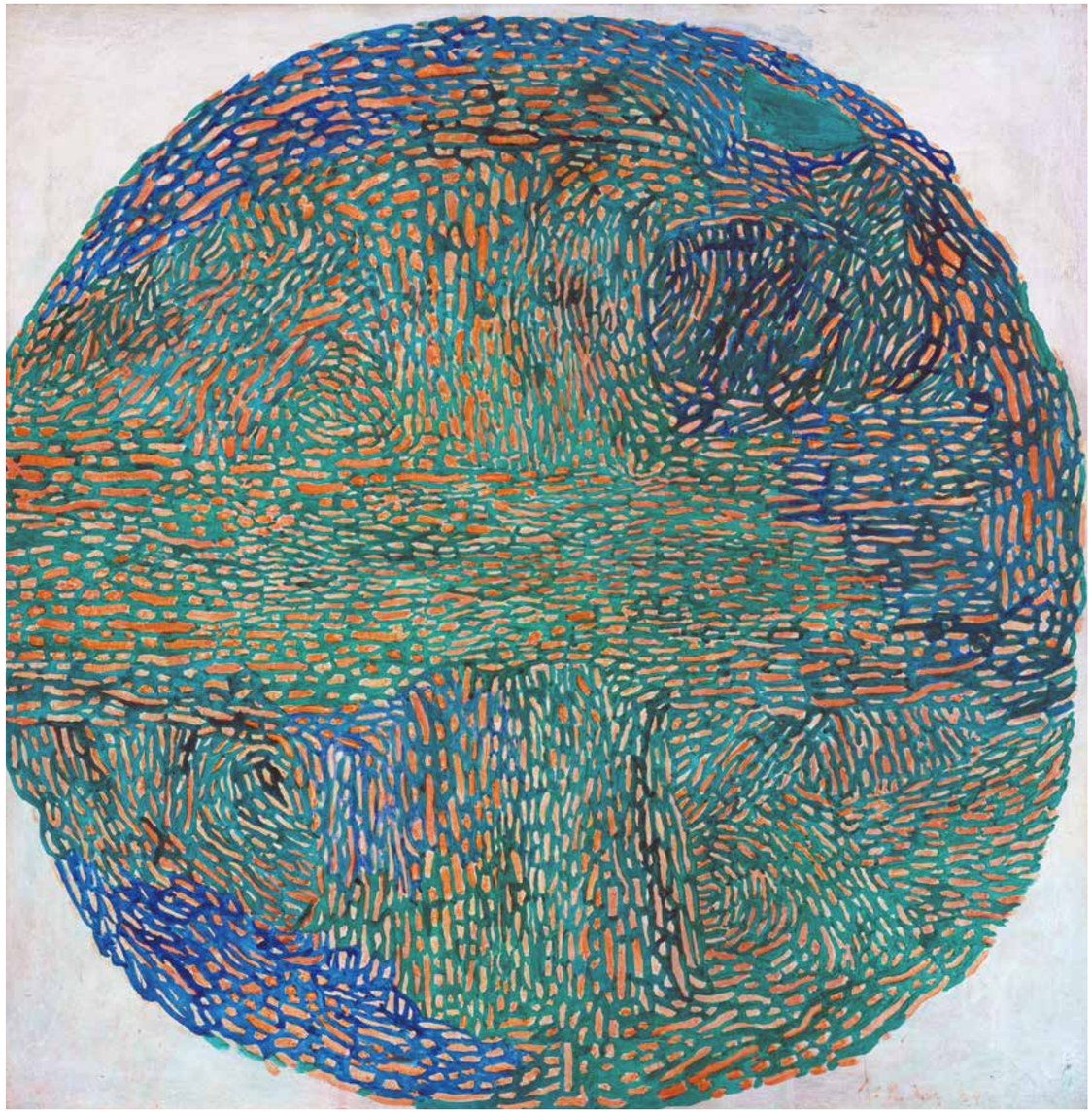

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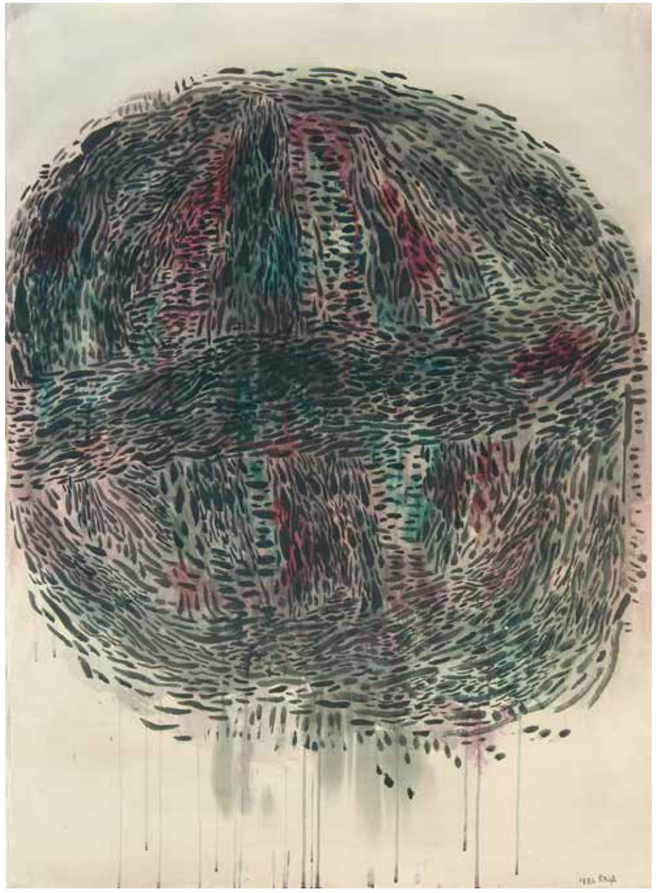

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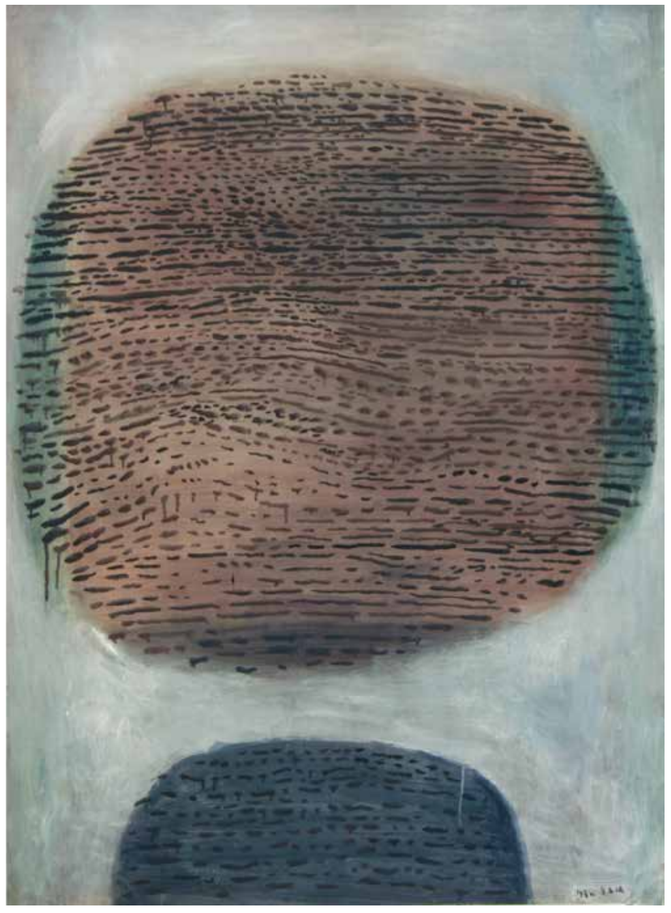

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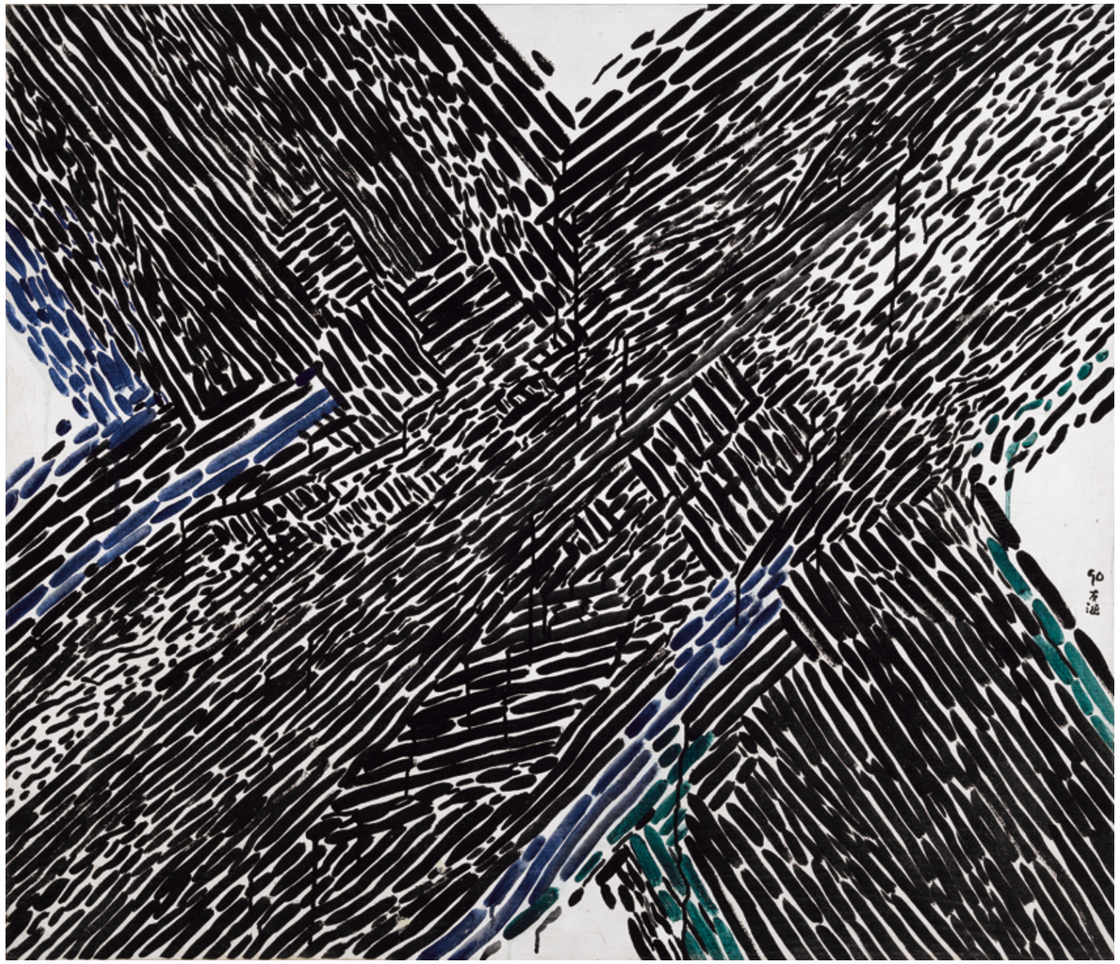

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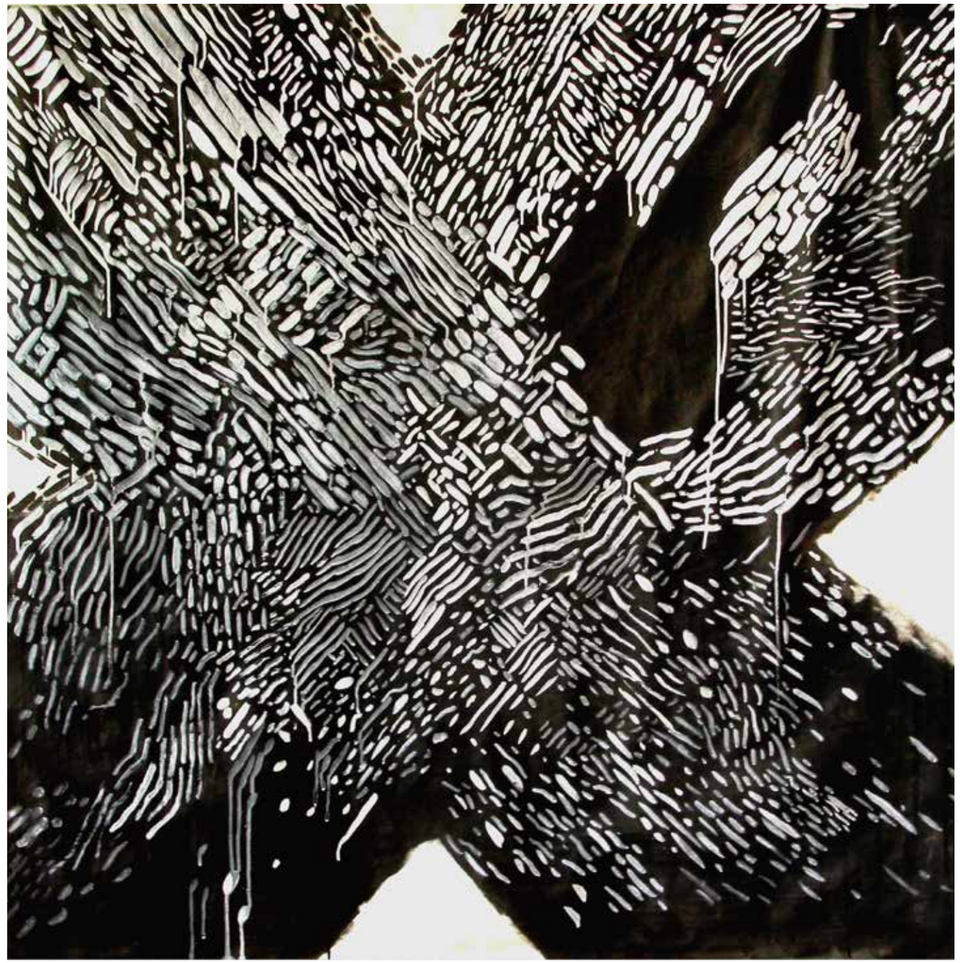

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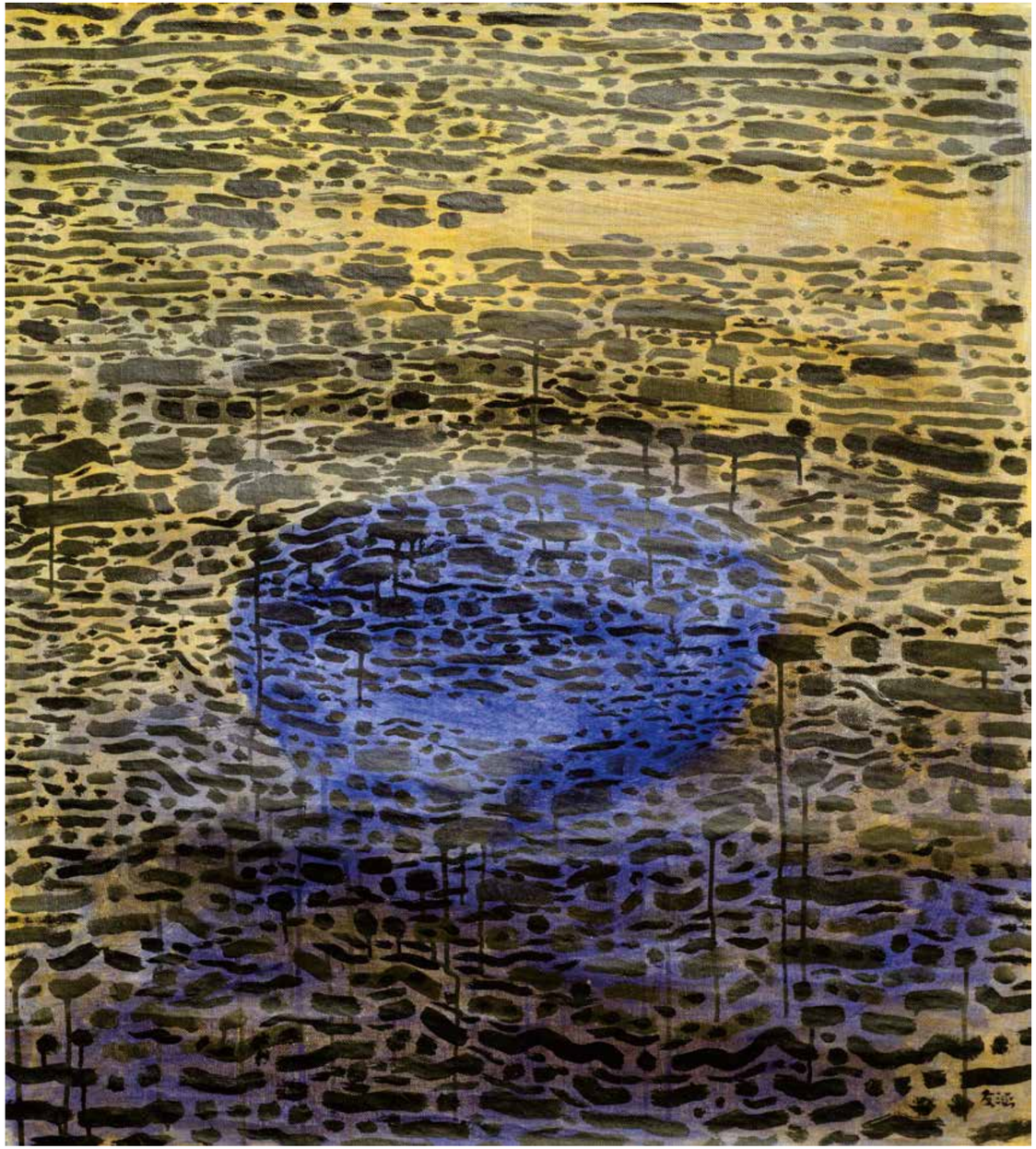

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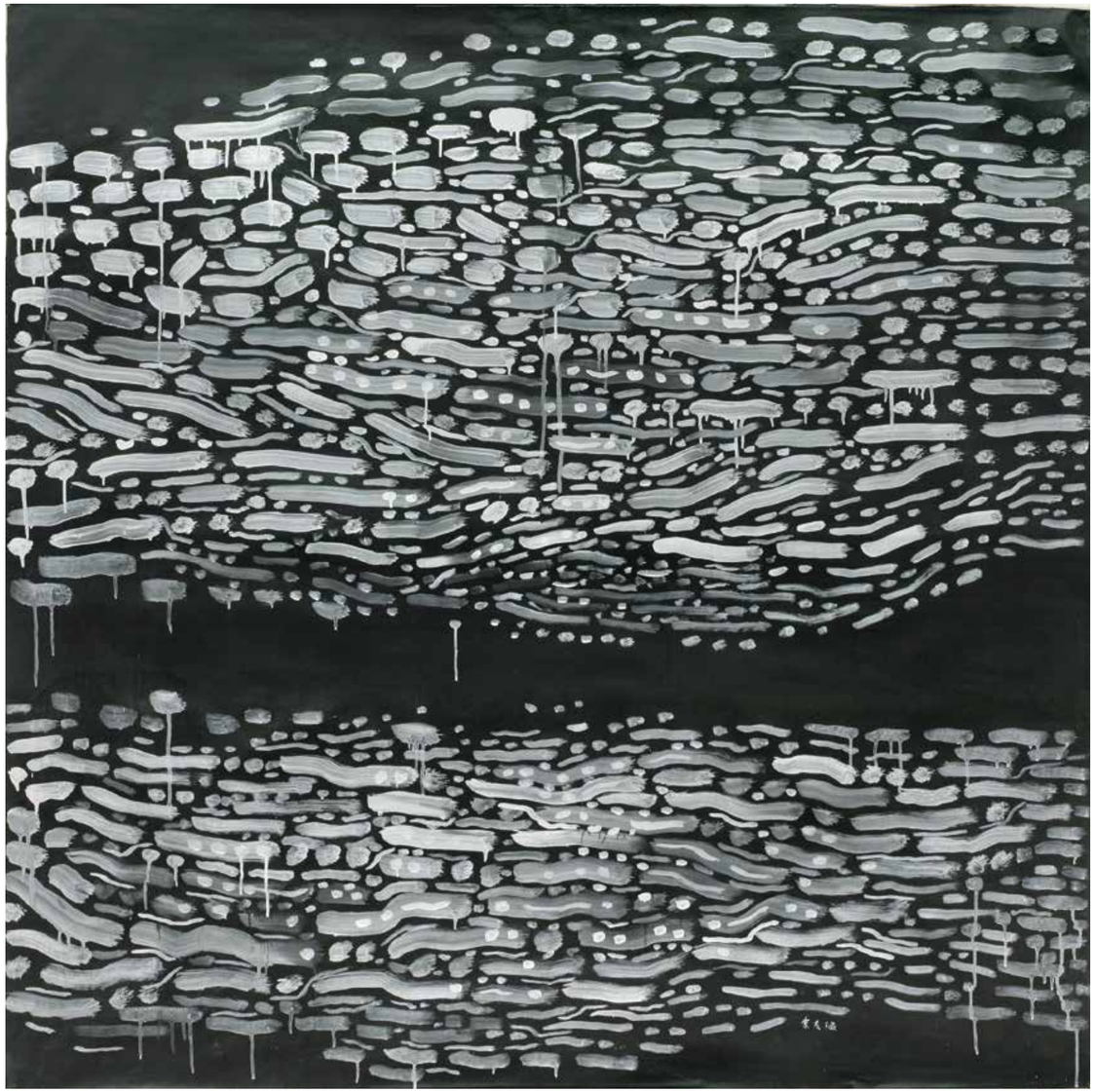

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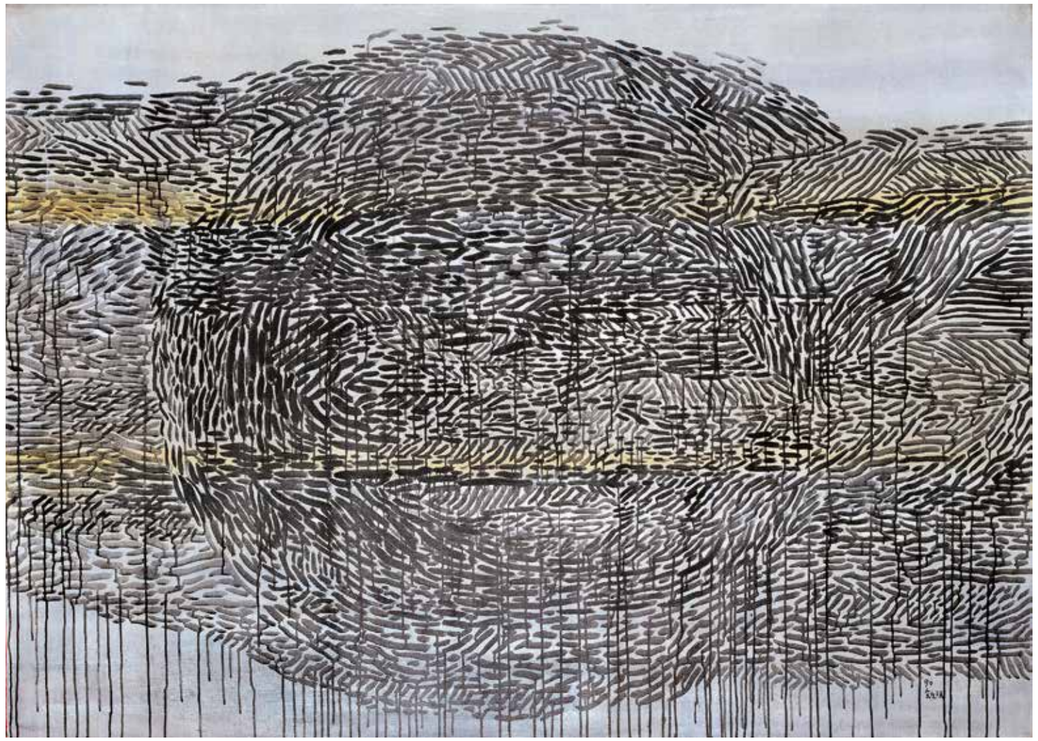

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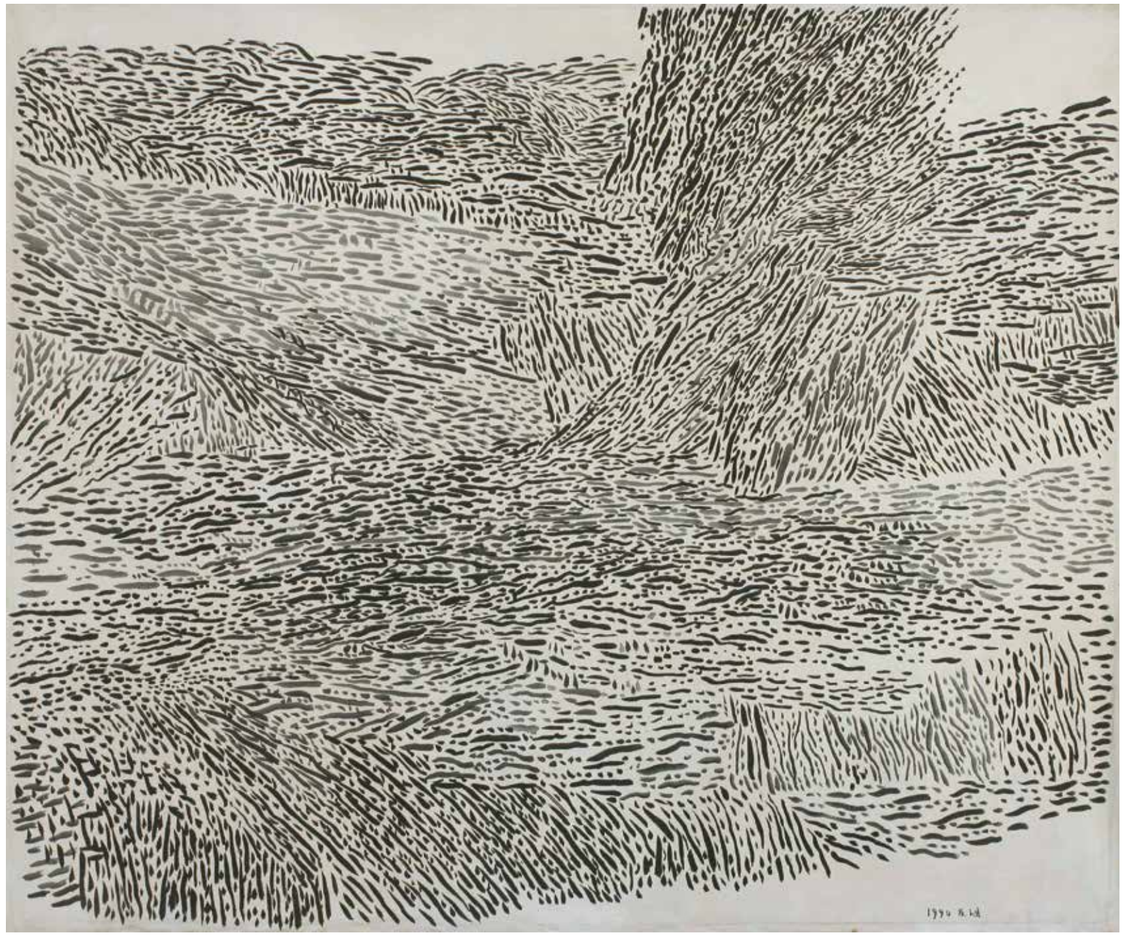

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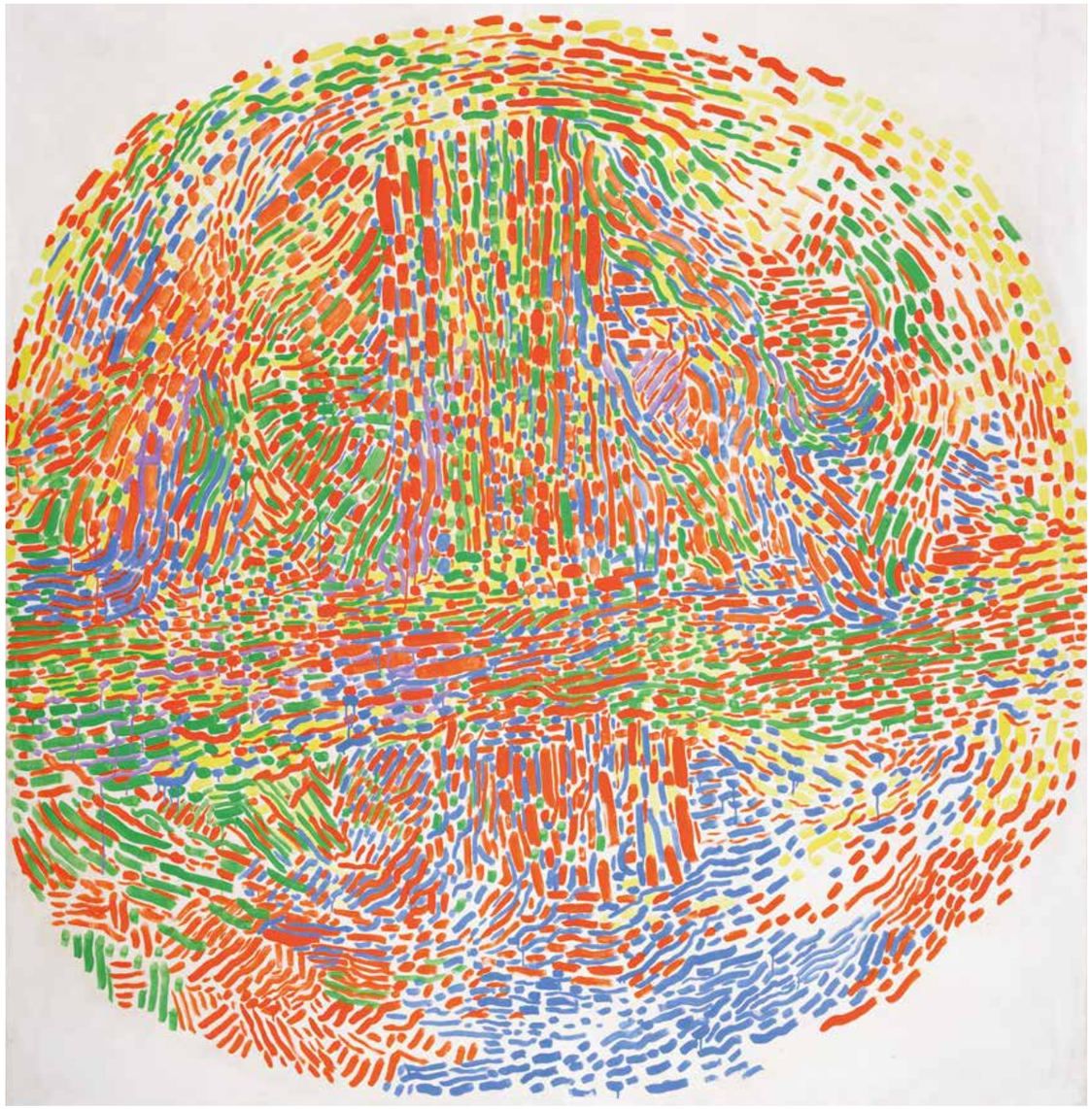

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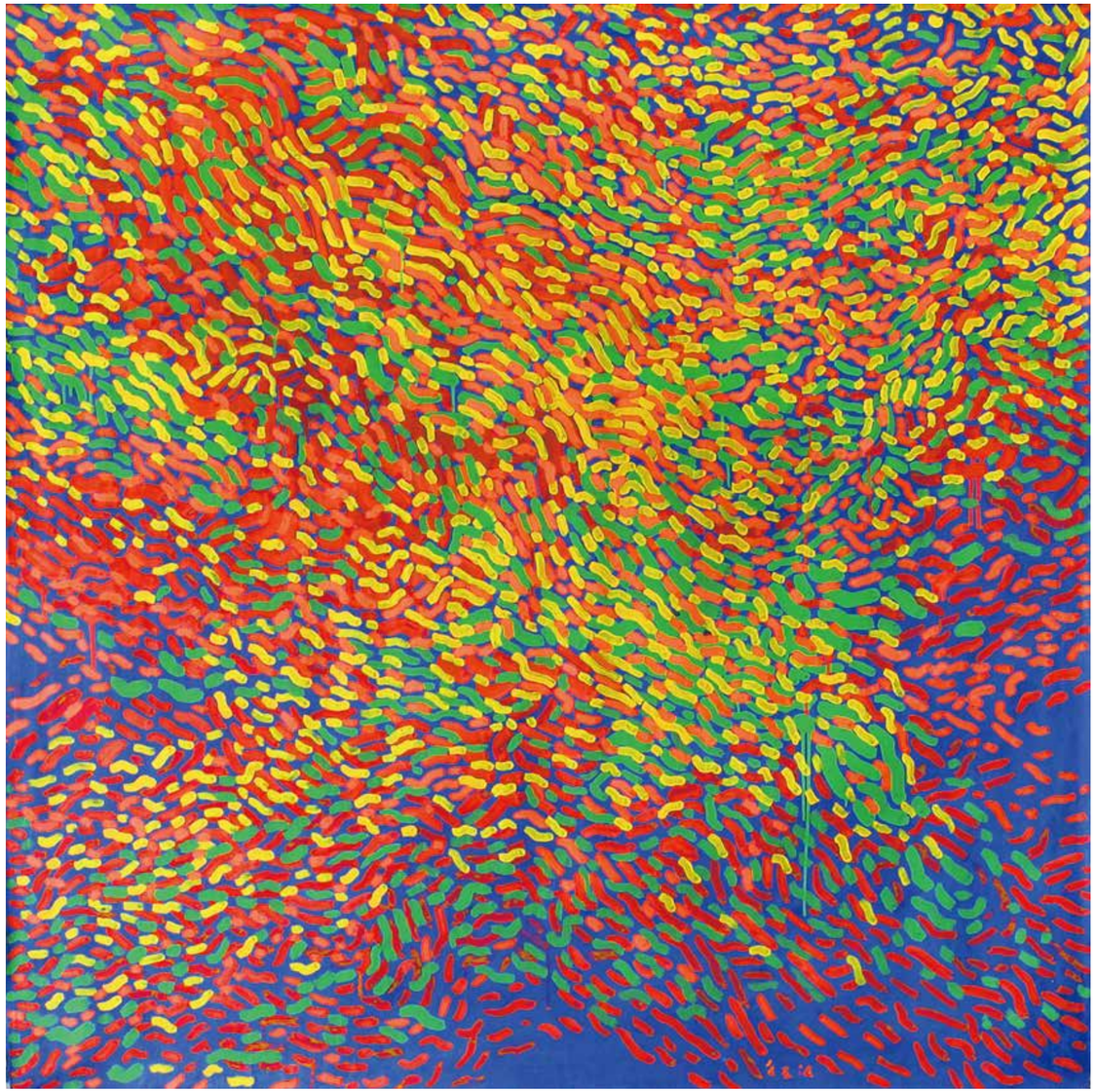

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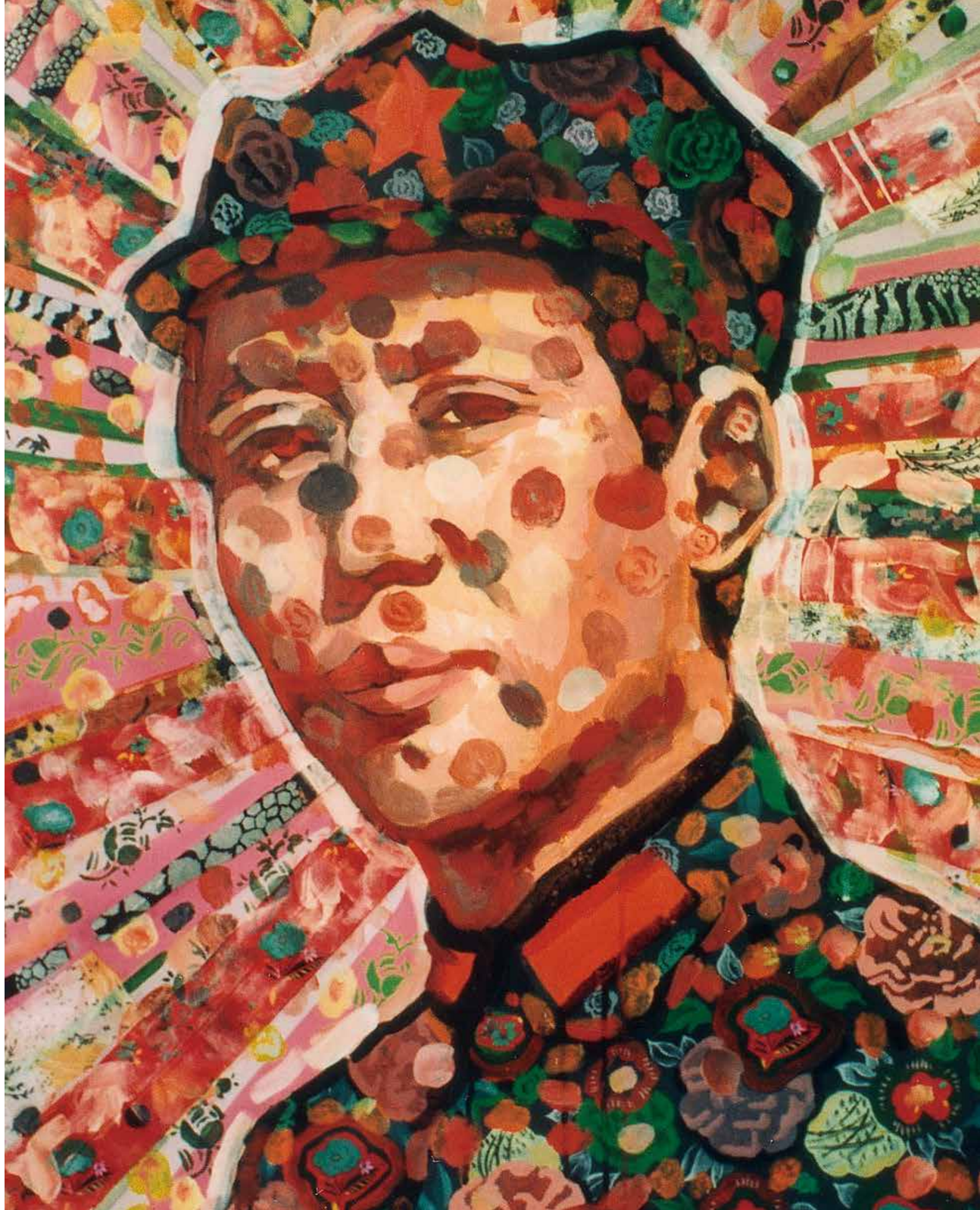

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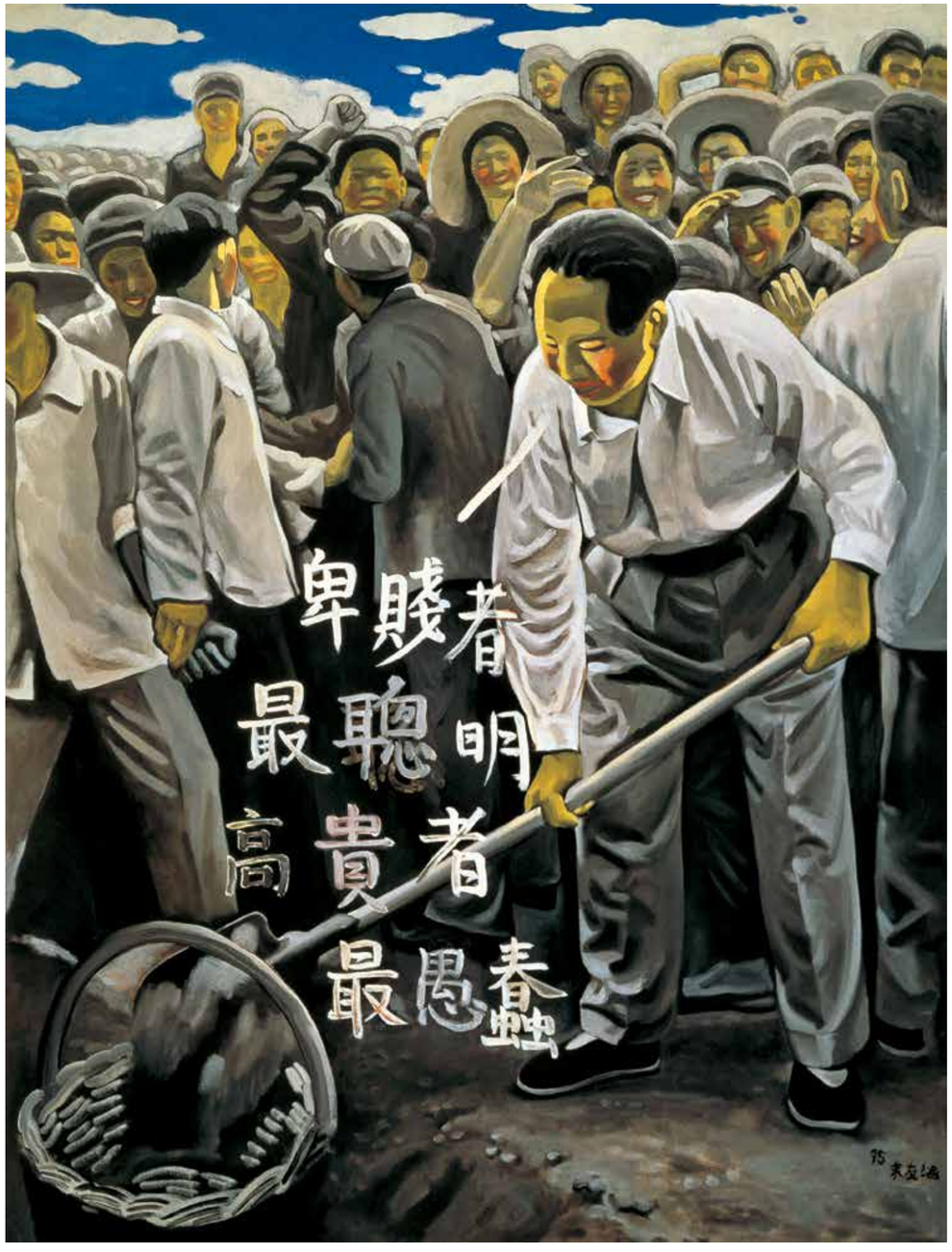

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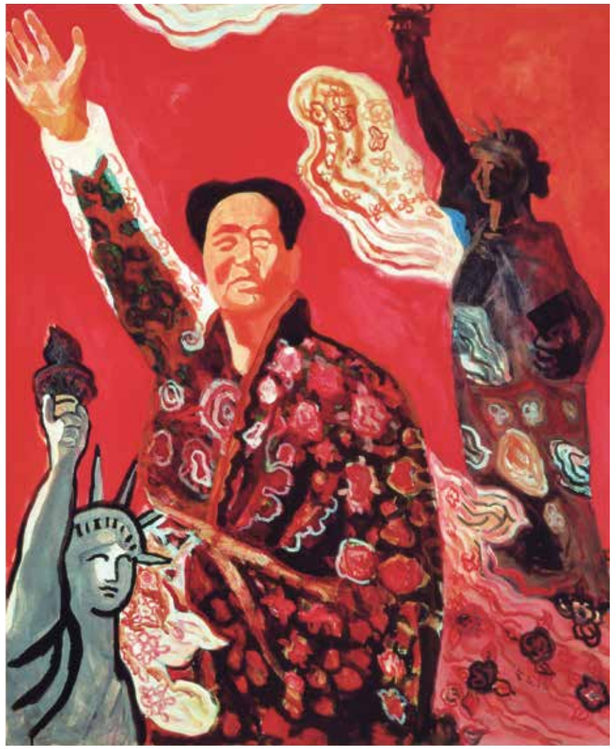

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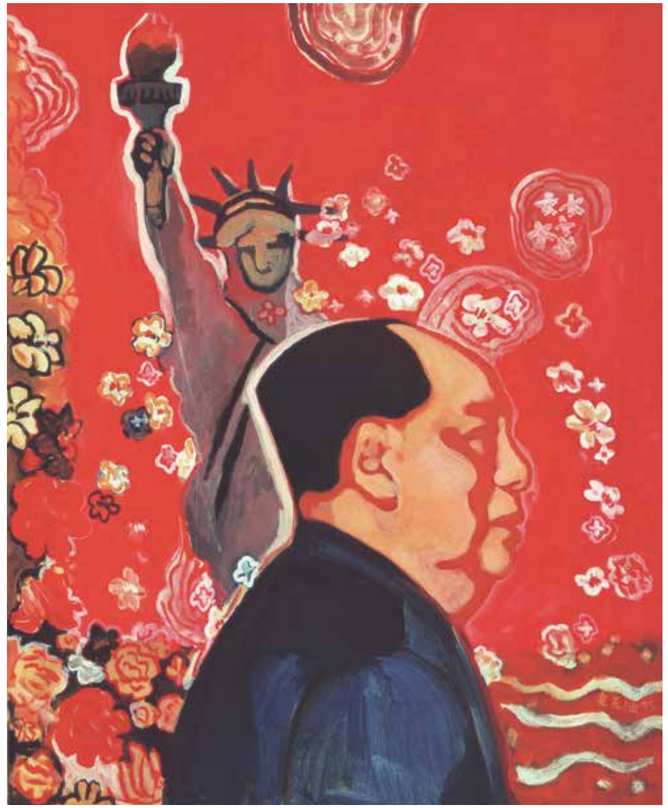

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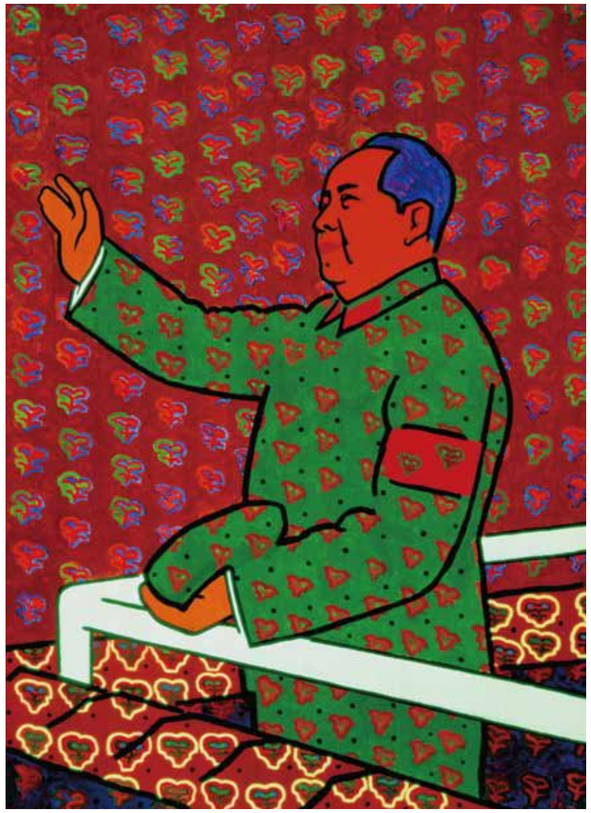

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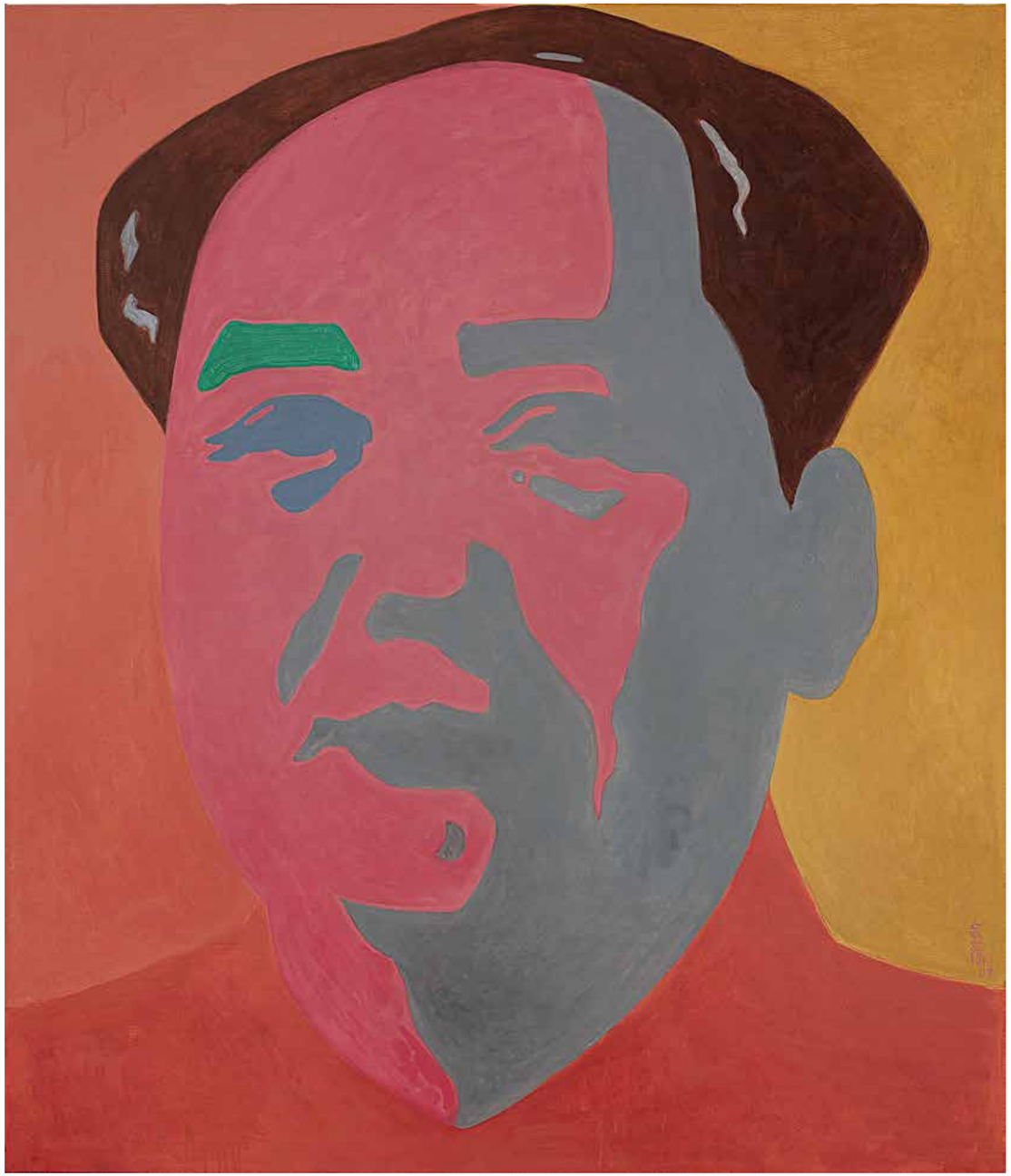

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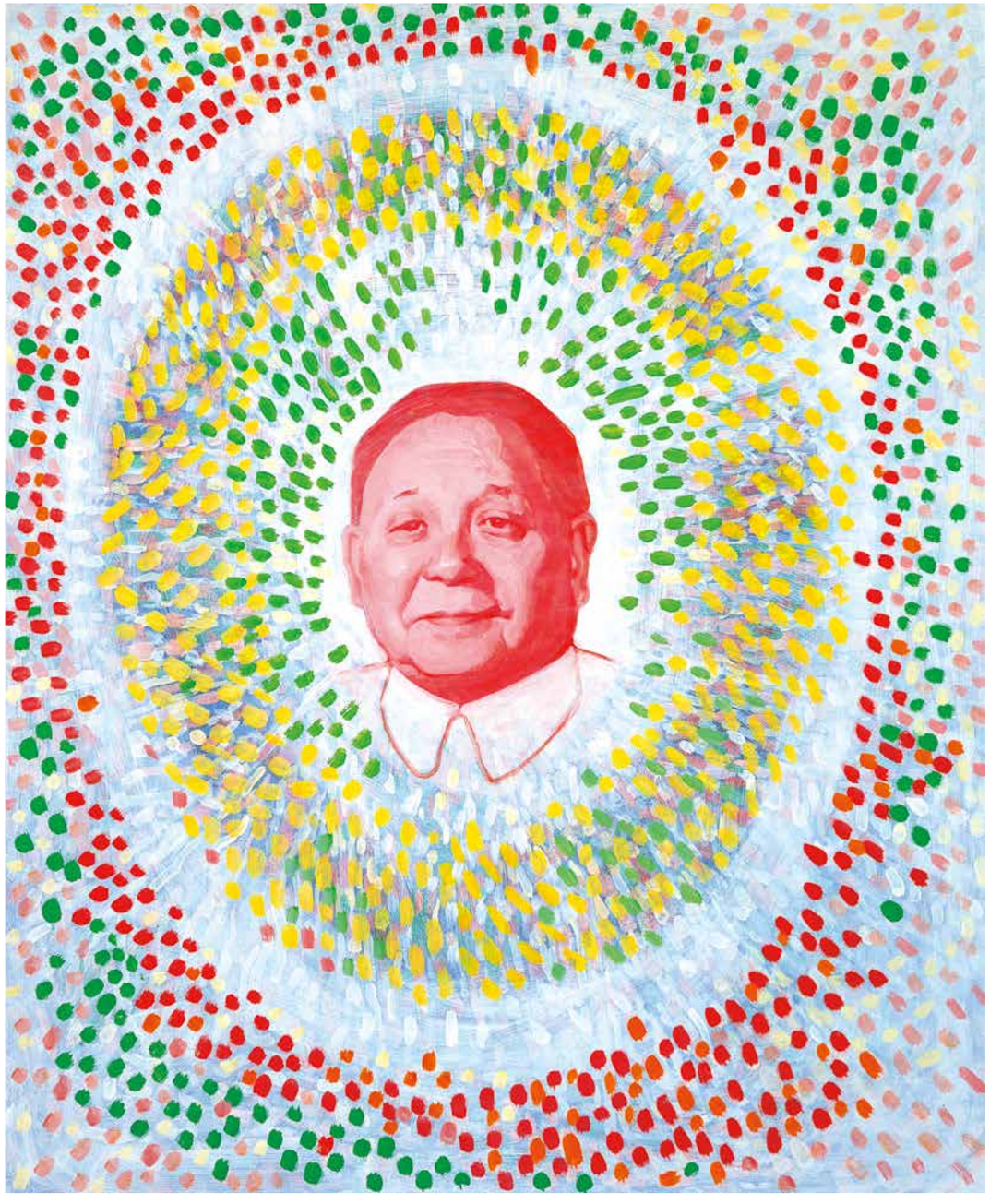

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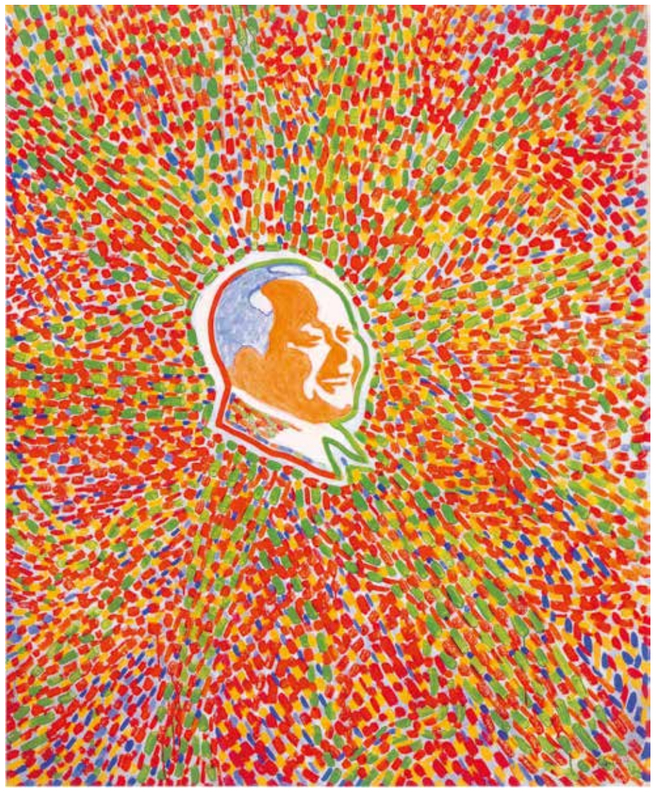

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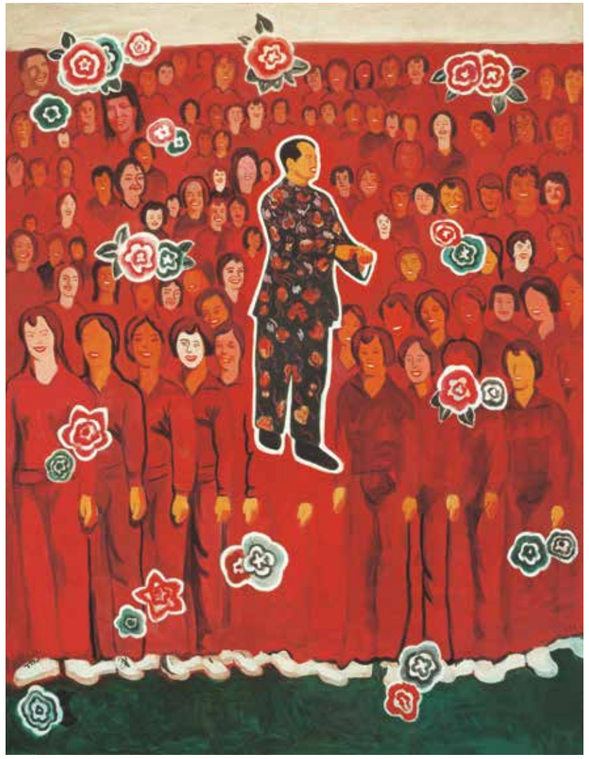

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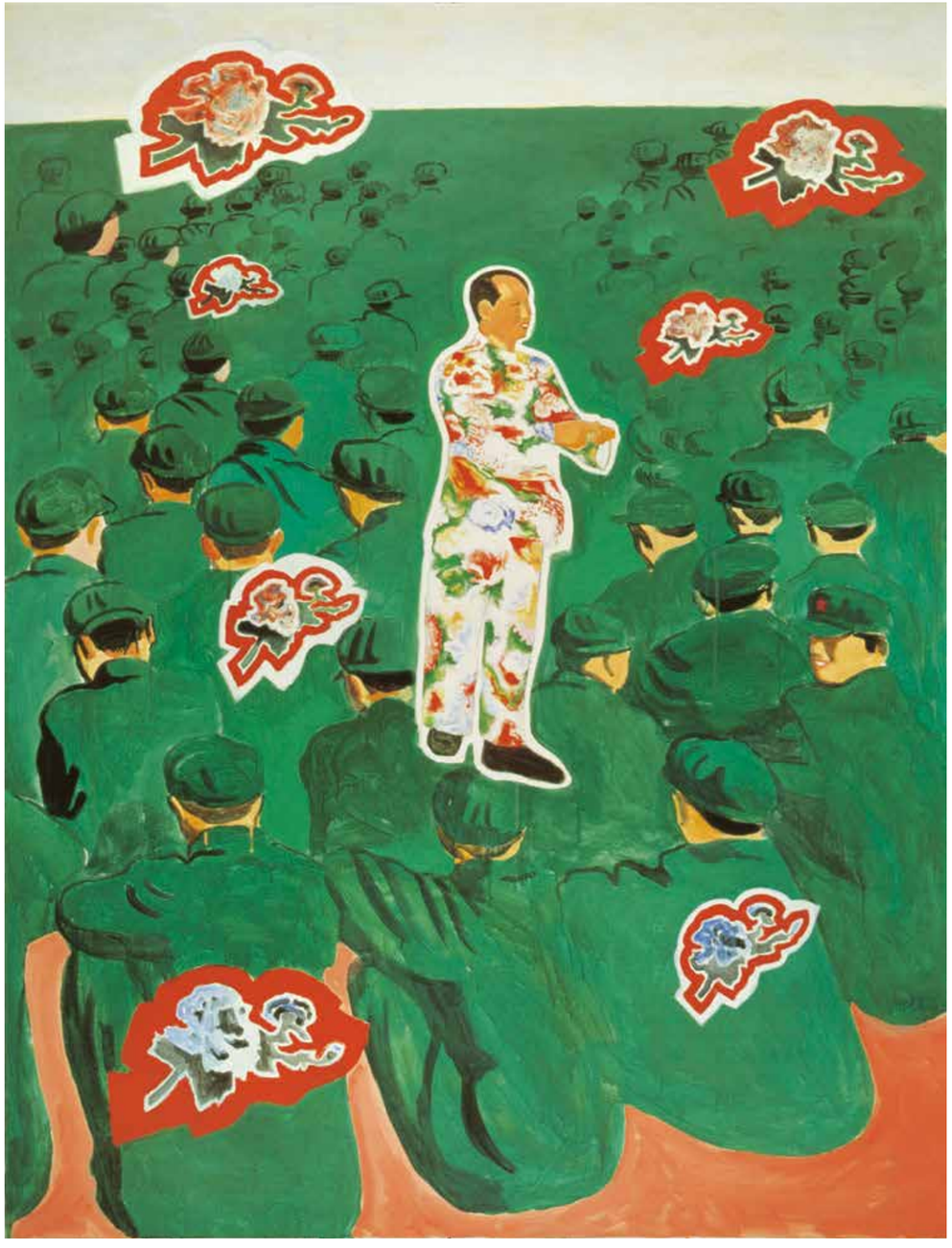

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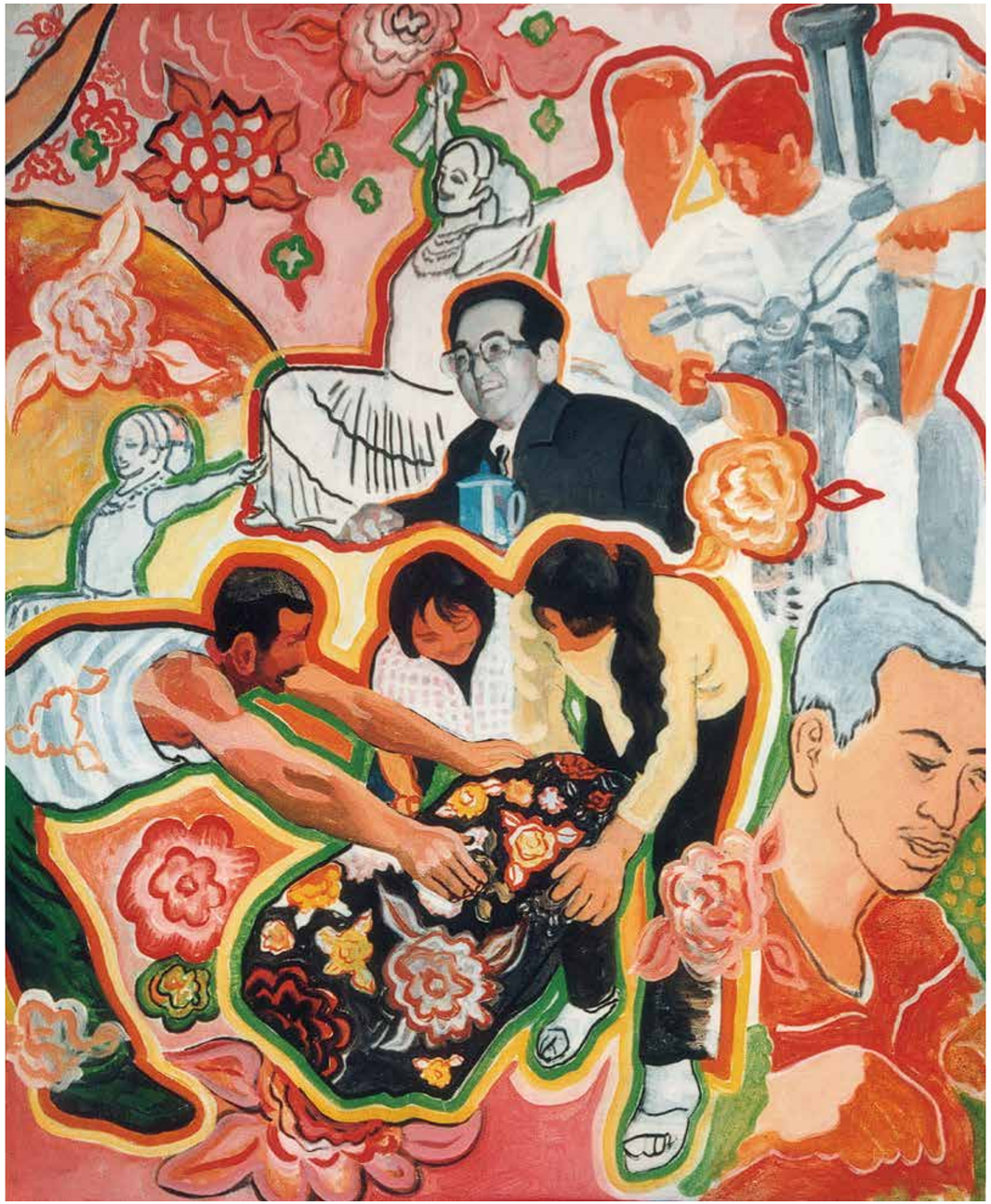

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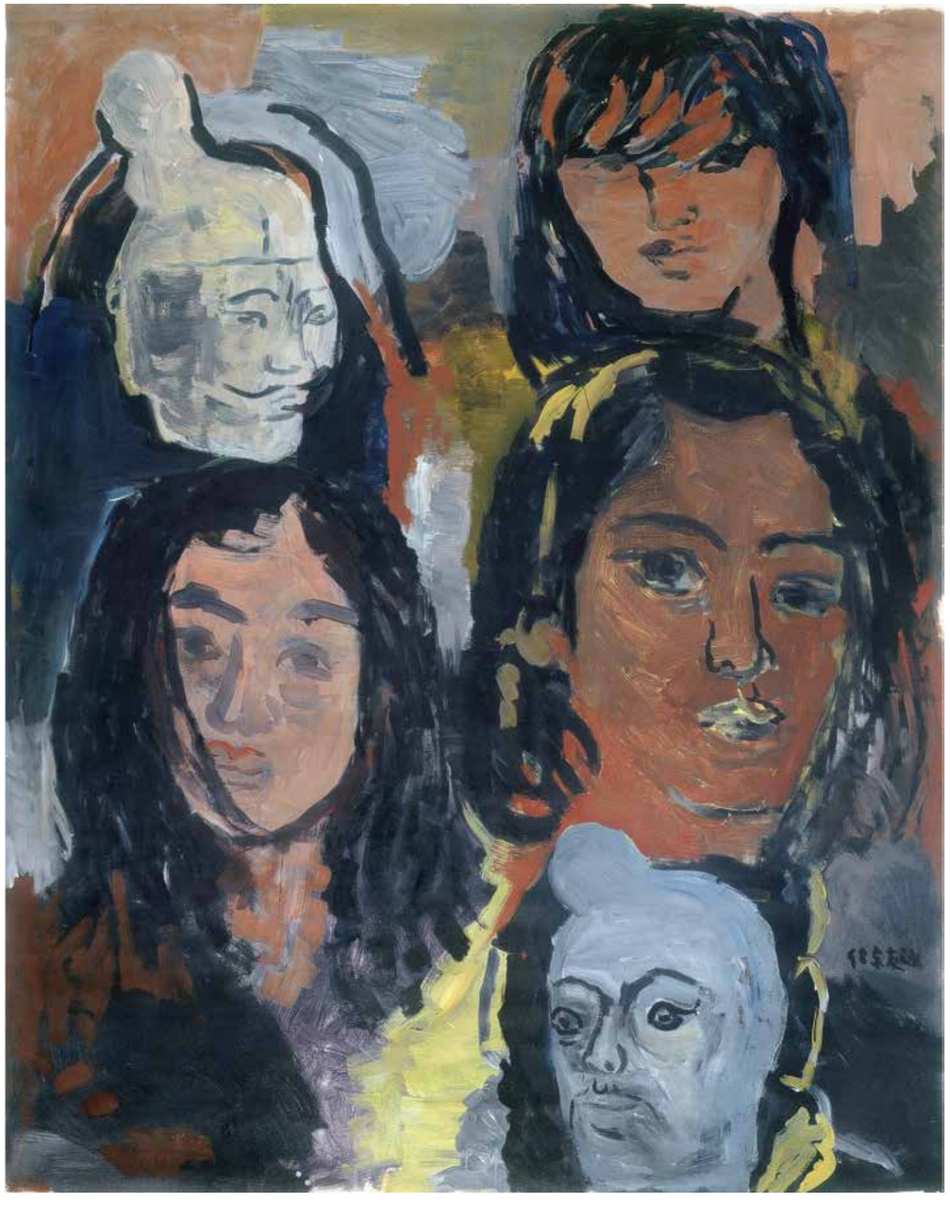

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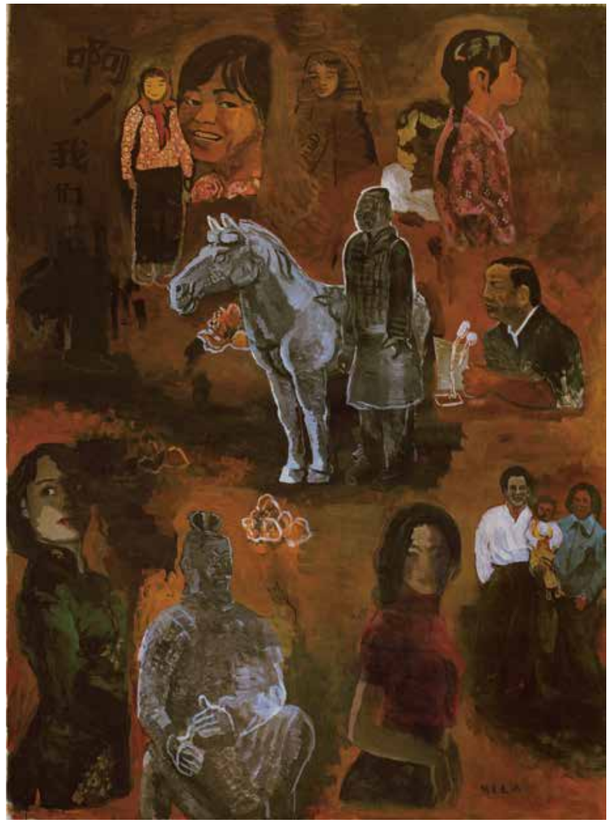

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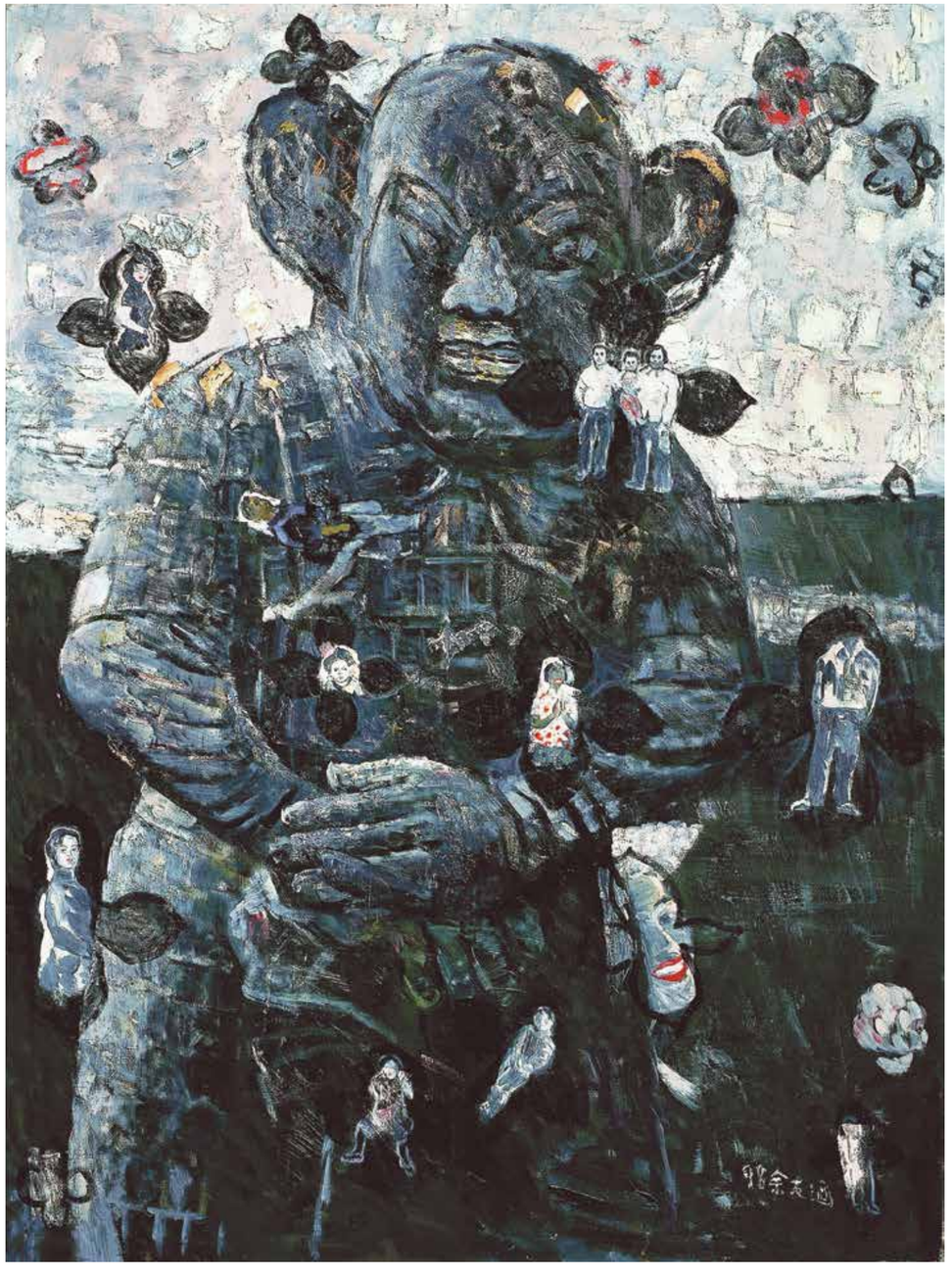

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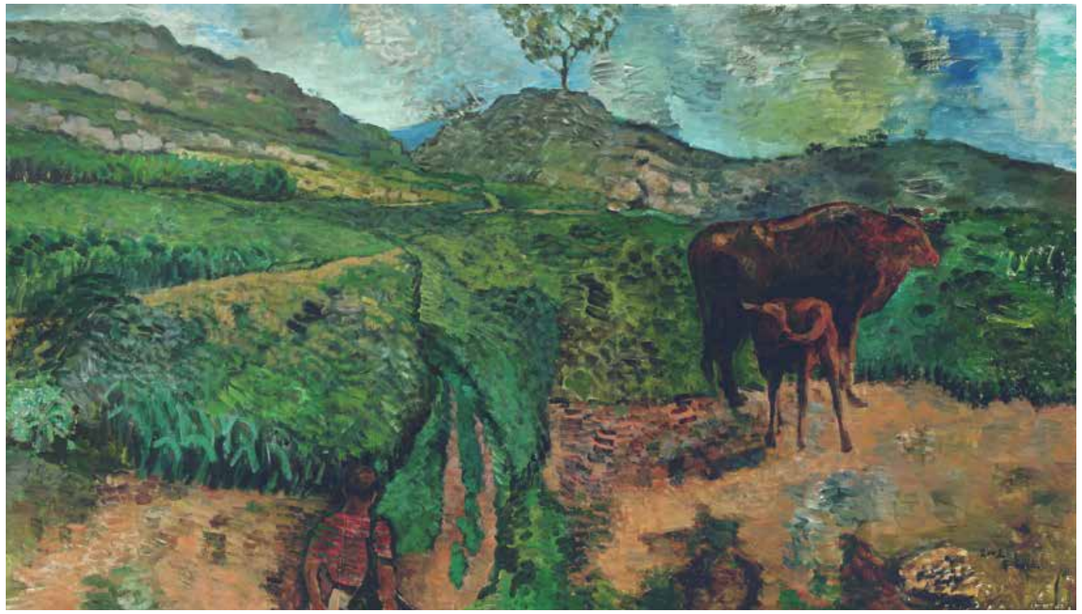

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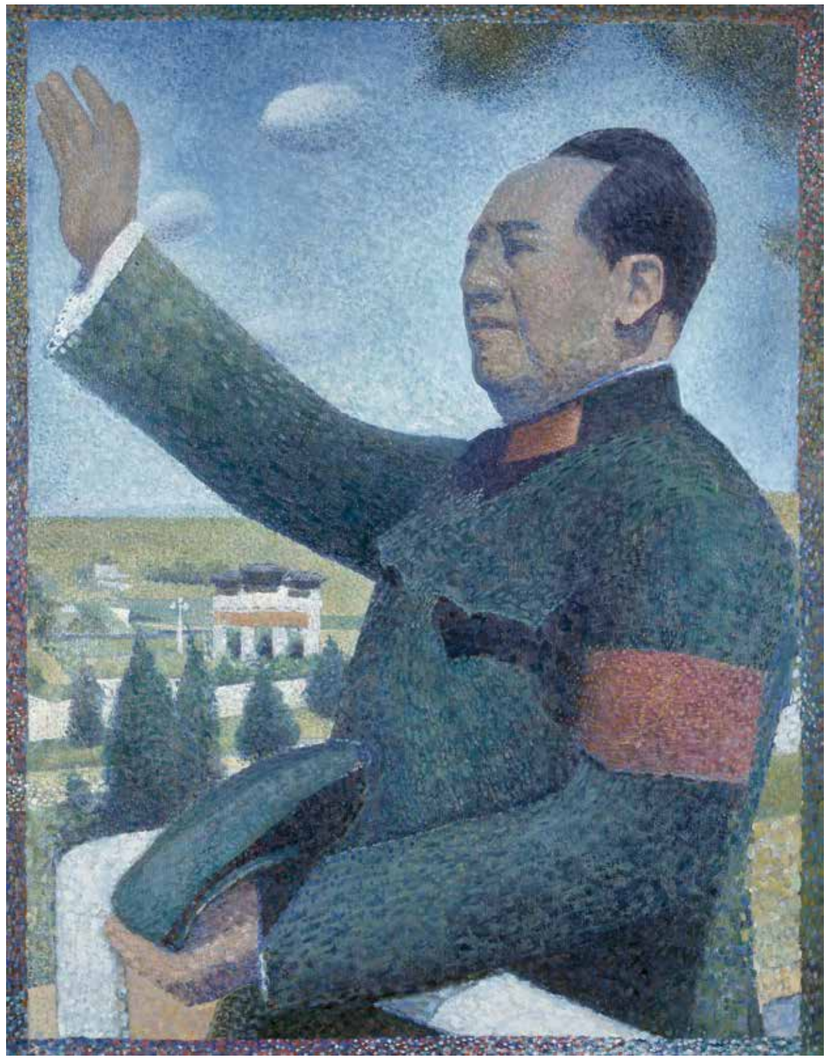

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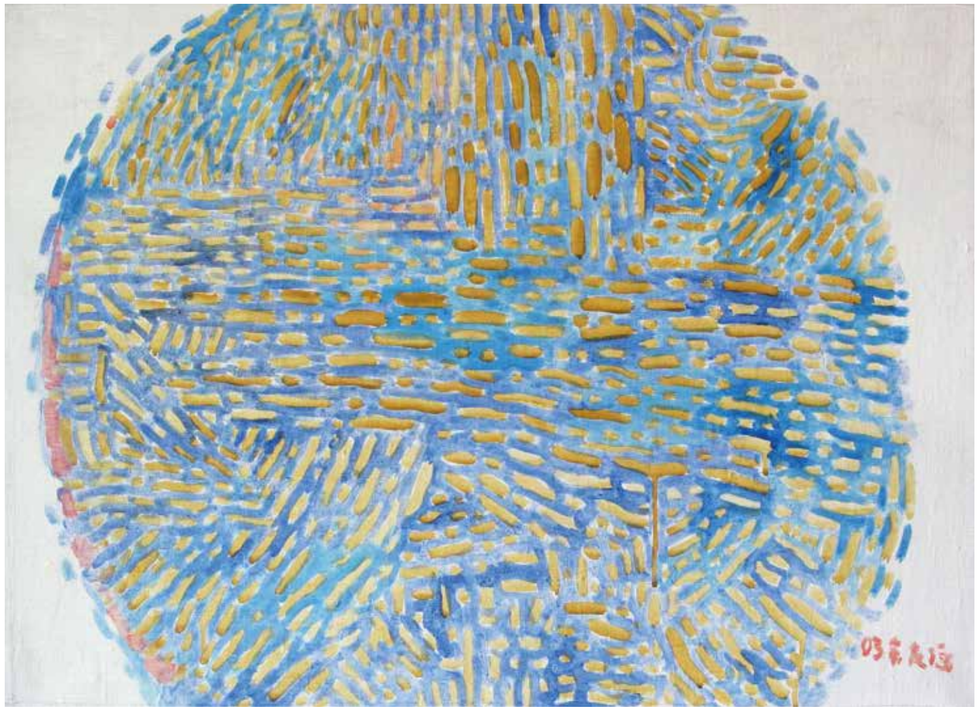

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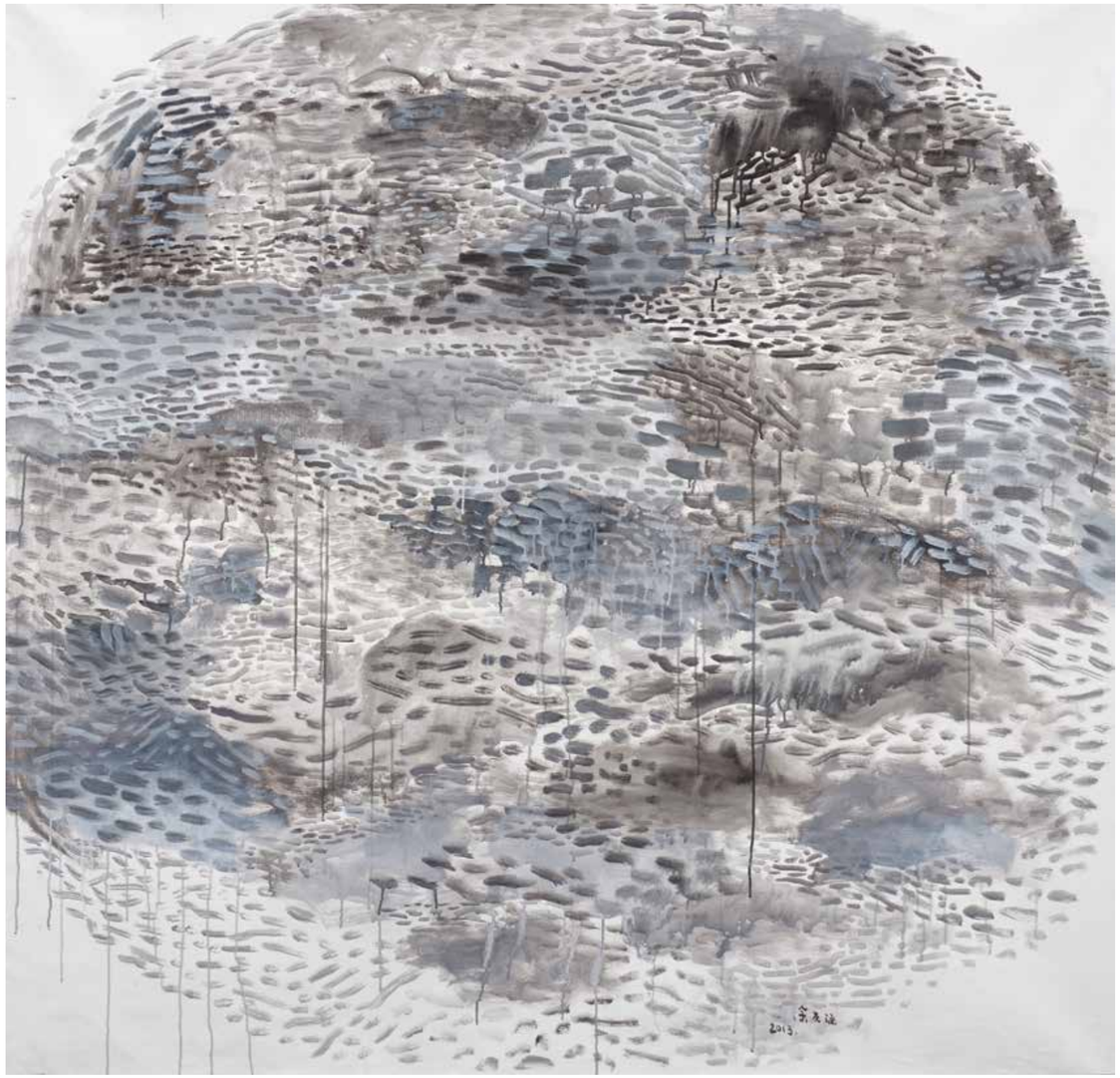

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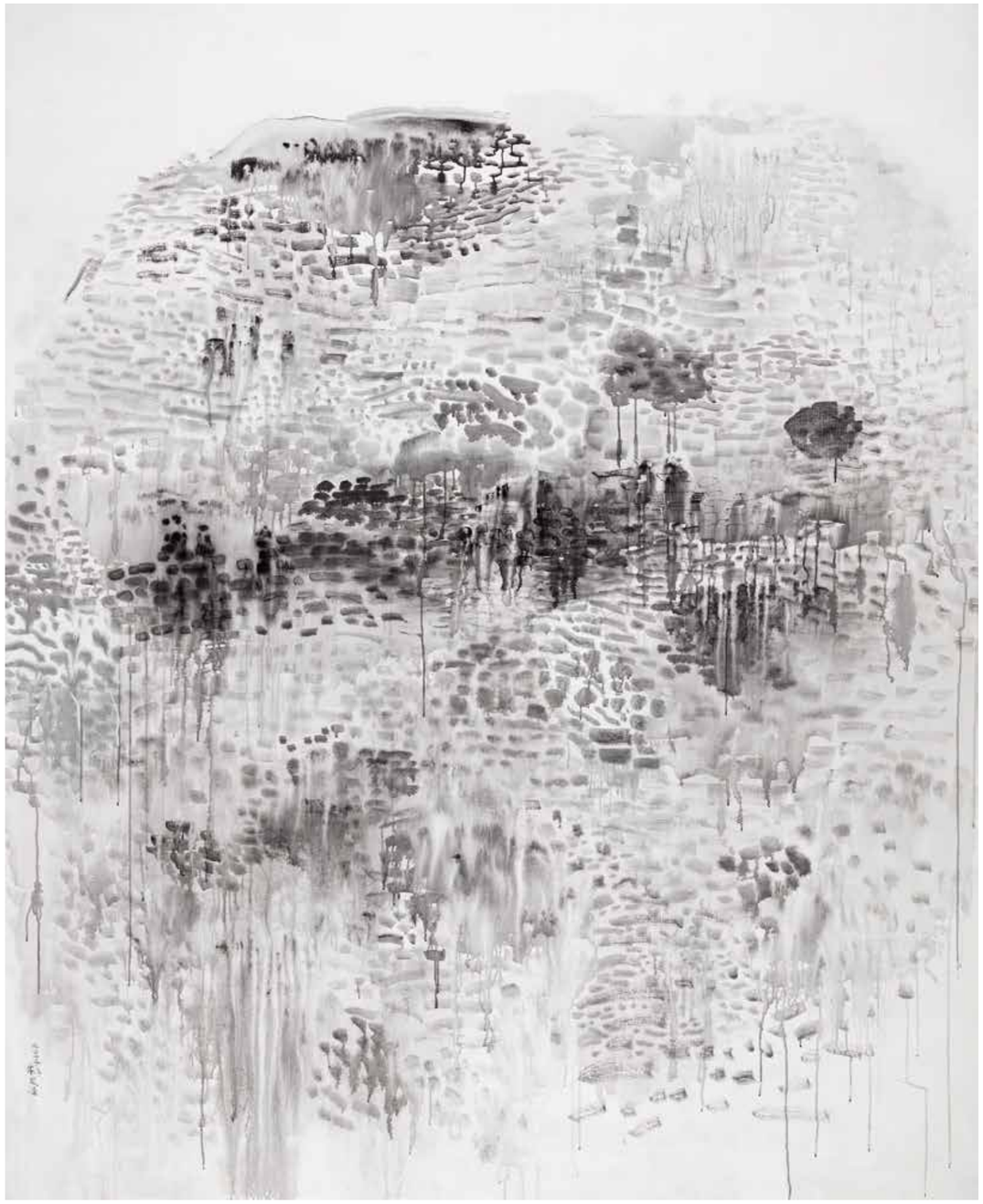

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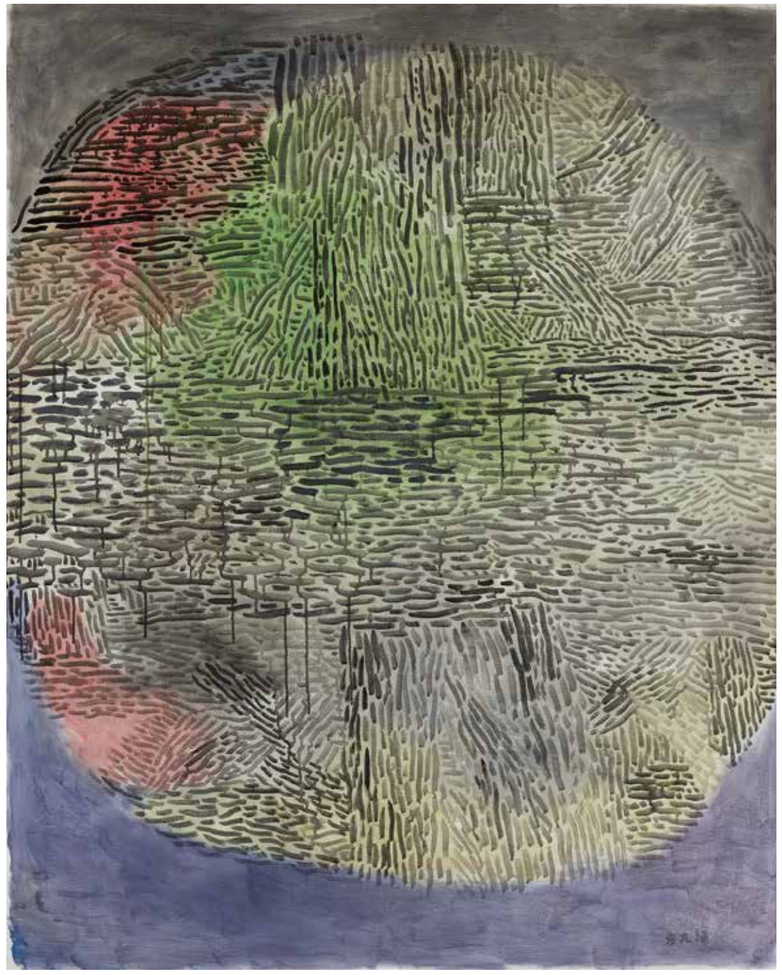

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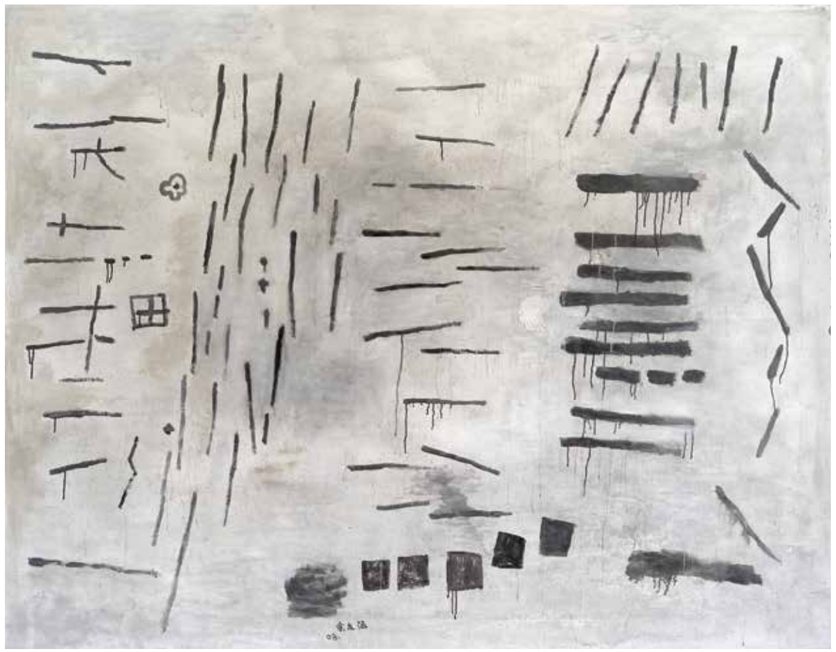

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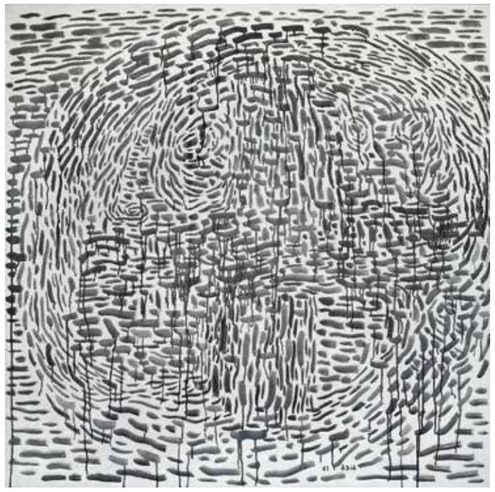

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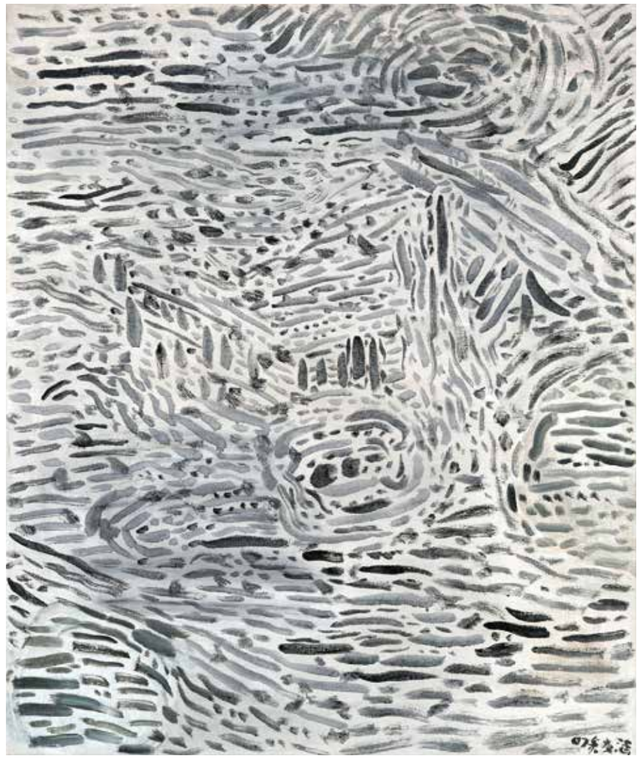

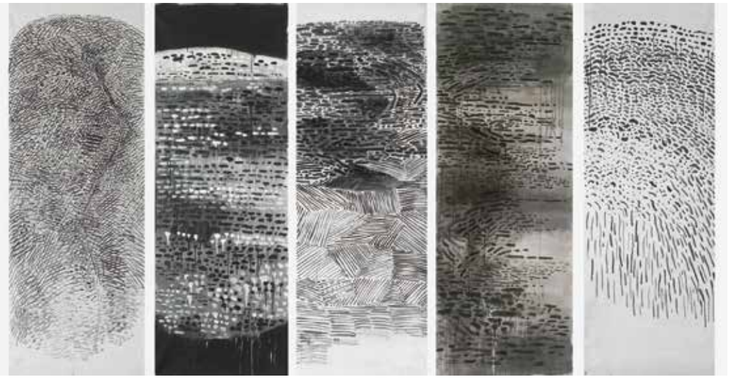

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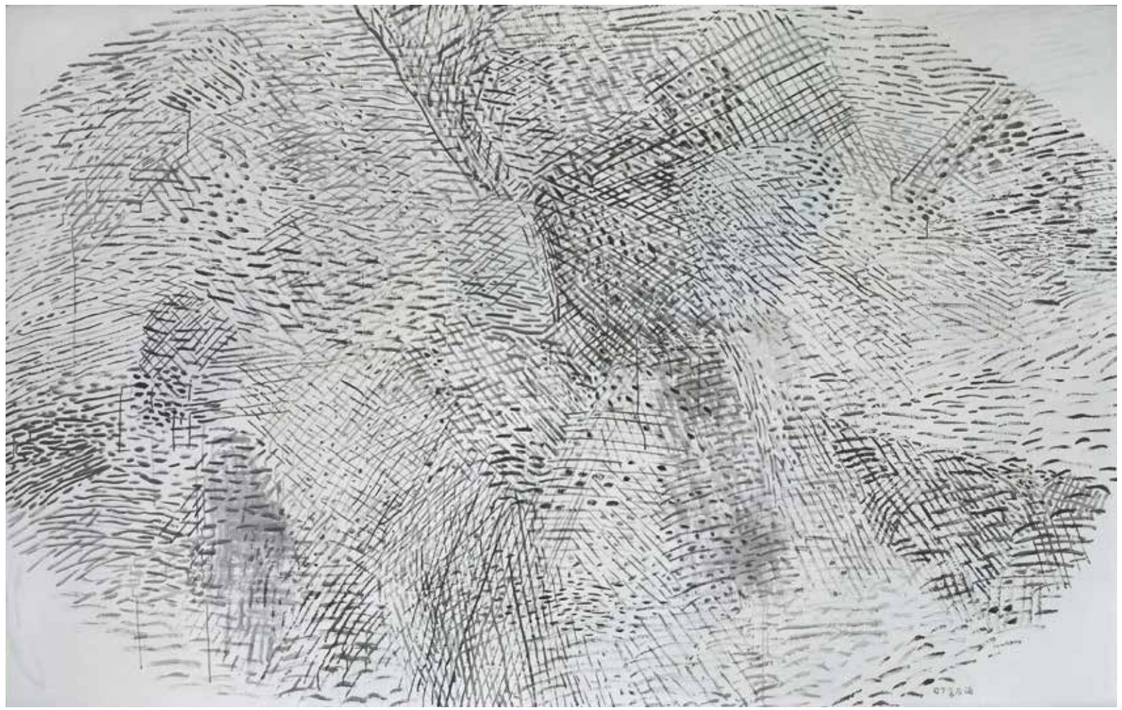

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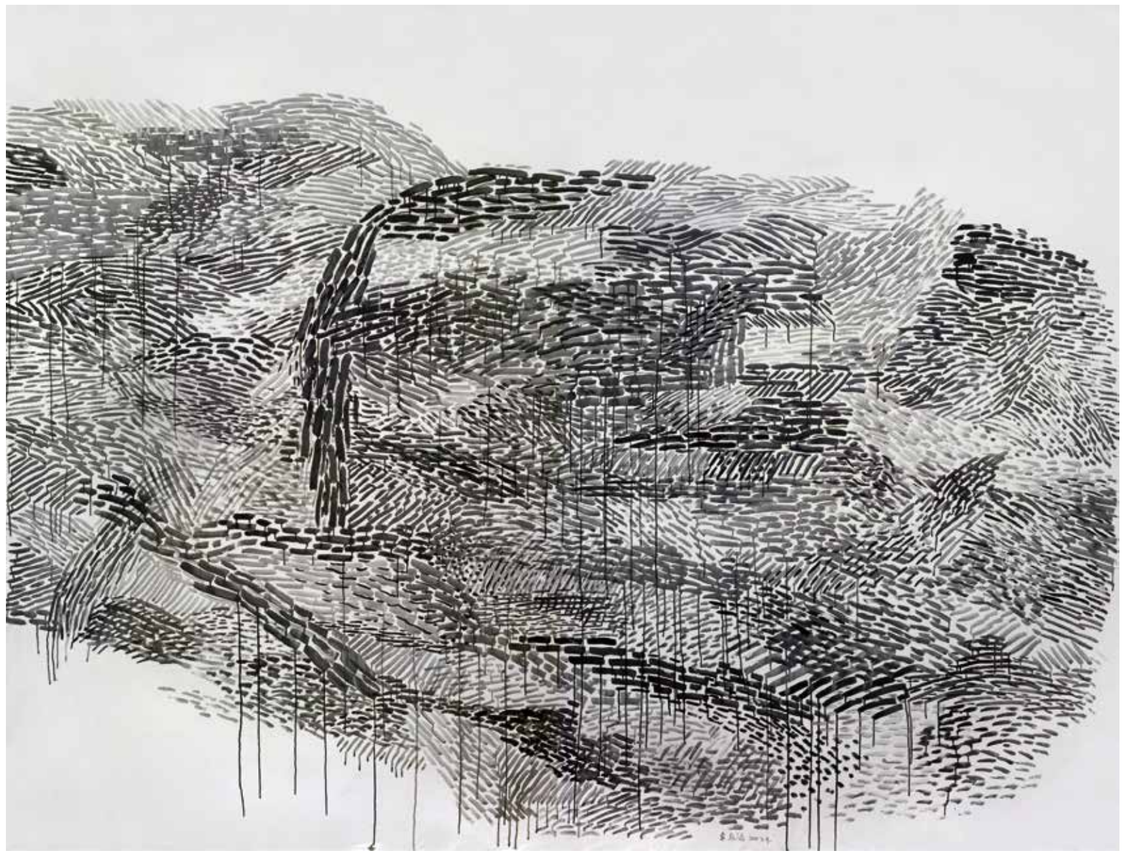

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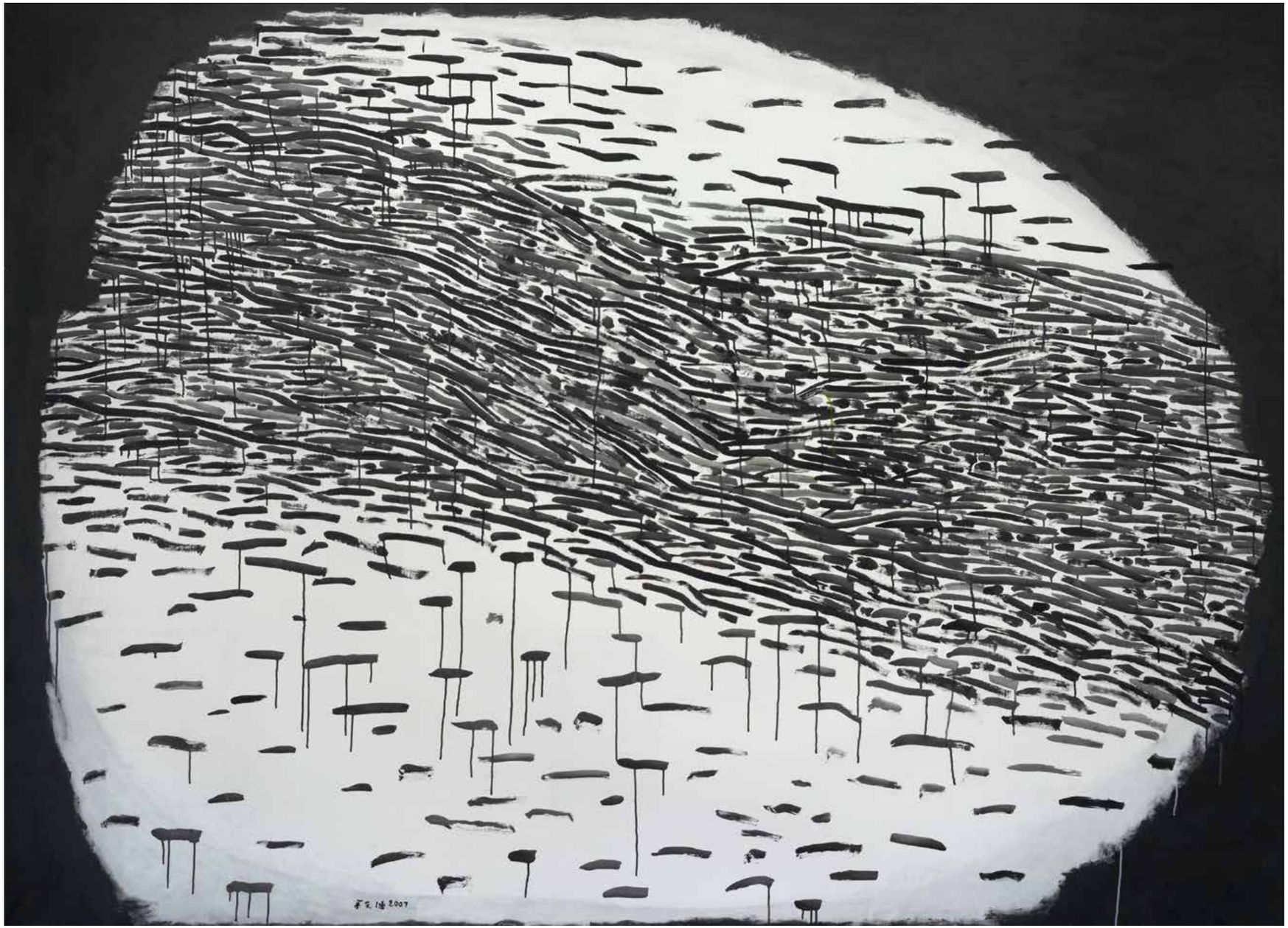

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All dimensions are in centimetres; height precedes width.

Li Village
1973
Oil on paper
~24 x 20 cm
PLATE 1

Li Village Primary School
1973
Oil on paper
~14 x 25 cm
PLATE 2

Li Village Primary School II
1973
Oil on paper
~20 x 20 cm
PLATE 3

Huating Road
1973-1977
Oil on cardboard
~40 x 55 cm
PLATE 4

Gao An Road II
1980
Oil on paper
~54 x 79 cm
PLATE 5

Xiangyang Park
1977
Oil on paper
37.5 x 32.5 cm
PLATE 6

Kangping Road
1977
Oil on paper
~39.5 x 44 cm
PLATE 7

Gao An Road I
1979
Oil on paper
~54 x 79 cm
PLATE 8

Fuxing Middle Road
1975
Oil on paper
44 x 39.5 cm
PLATE 9

Life Study
1981
Oil on canvas
~74 x 55 cm
PLATE 10

Fuxing Middle Road, Street Scene
1983
Oil on canvas
~75 x 80 cm
PLATE 11

Still Life
1979
Oil on paper
~54 x 79 cm
PLATE 12

Wuxing Road 1
1980
Oil on paper
37.5 x 53 cm
PLATE 13

Lushan Landscape
1980
Oil on paper
80 x 80 cm
PLATE 14

Dalian Children's Park
1983
Oil on canvas
50 x 60 cm
PLATE 15

Weigang
1979-1989
Oil on cardboard
39.5 x 44 cm
PLATE 16

Hengshan Hotel
1982
Oil on cardboard
~44 x 57 cm
PLATE 17

Jinjiang Street
1982
Oil on paper
~44 x 57 cm
PLATE 18

Wukang Mansion
1983
Oil on canvas
58 x 68.5 cm
PLATE 19

Xujiahui Cathedral
1982
Oil on paper
~60 x 50 cm
PLATE 20

Wuxing Road New Village
1979
Oil on paper
37.5 x 53 cm
PLATE 21

Huaihai Middle Road
1984
Oil on paper
53.5 x 72 cm
PLATE 22

Waibaidu Bridge
1984
Oil on cardboard
44 x 57 cm
PLATE 23

Abstract 1982-3
1982
Poster paint on paper
~78 x 108 cm
PLATE 24

Abstract after Han dynasty wall painting
1983
Acrylic on paper
~78 x 108 cm
PLATE 25

Autumn in Beijing
1980
Oil on paper
36 x 47.5 cm
PLATE 26

Abstract 1982-21
1982
Oil on canvas
~50 x 55 cm
PLATE 27

Abstract 1983-4
1983
Acrylic on paper
~78 x 108 cm
PLATE 28

Abstract 1984-22
1984
Eggshell and lacquer on canvas
~40 x 50 cm
PLATE 29

Abstract 1981-4
1981
Poster paint on paper
~78 x 108 cm
PLATE 30

Abstract 1981-3
1981
Poster paint on paper
~78 x 108 cm
PLATE 31

Abstract 1982-15
1982
Oil on canvas
~45 x 60 cm
PLATE 32

Abstract 1983-3
1983
Acrylic on paper
~78 x 108 cm
PLATE 33

Abstract 1982-11
1982
Oil on canvas
50 x 65 cm
PLATE 34

Abstract 1982-14
1982
Oil on canvas
56 x 65 cm
PLATE 35

Abstract 1981-2
1981
Oil on cardboard
50 x 60 cm
PLATE 36

Abstract 1981-1
1981
Poster paint on rice paper
65 x 65 cm
PLATE 37

Abstract 1983-9
1983
Acrylic on paper
~78 x 108 cm
PLATE 38

Abstract 1983-5
1983
Acrylic on paper
~78 x 108 cm
PLATE 39

Abstract 1983-18
1983
Acrylic on paper
~78 x 108 cm
PLATE 40

Abstract 1983-10
1983
Acrylic on paper
~78 x 108 cm
PLATE 41

Abstract 1983-22
1983
Acrylic on canvas
~80 x 120 cm
PLATE 42

Abstract 1983-6
1983
Acrylic on paper
~108 x 79 cm
PLATE 43

Abstract 1984-1
1984
Acrylic on canvas
56 x 78 cm
PLATE 44

Abstract 1984-2
1984
Acrylic on canvas
77 x 107 cm
PLATE 45

Circle 1985-3
1985
Acrylic on canvas
162 x 130 cm
PLATE 46

Circle 1985-5
1985
Acrylic on canvas
135 x 132 cm
PLATE 47

White Circle 1985-02
1984-1986
Acrylic on canvas
87 x 114 cm
PLATE 48

Circle 1986-31
1986
Acrylic on canvas
78 x 108 cm
PLATE 49

Circle 1986-6
1986
Acrylic on canvas
~160 x 130 cm
PLATE 50

Circle 2002-1
2002
Acrylic on canvas
~160 x 130 cm
PLATE 51

Circle 1986-7
1986
Acrylic on canvas
145 x 105 cm
PLATE 52

Circle 1988-4
1988
Acrylic on canvas
~158 x 132 cm
PLATE 53

Circle 1986-8
1986
Acrylic on canvas
198 x 199 cm
PLATE 54

Circle 1986-3
1986
Acrylic on canvas
~160 x 135 cm
PLATE 55

Circle 1988-6
1988
Acrylic on canvas
160 x 135 cm
PLATE 56

Circle 1987-1
1987
Acrylic on canvas
130 x 131.5 cm
PLATE 57

Abstract 1986-11
1986
Acrylic on paper
~109 x 79 cm
PLATE 58

Abstract 1986-20
1986
Acrylic on paper
~79 x 109 cm
PLATE 59

Untitled Mosaic
1987
Glass tiles
5 panels, each panel 400 x 165 cm
PLATE 60

Circle 1986-25
1986
Acrylic on paper
109 x 79 cm
PLATE 61

Circle 1986-12 (2)
1986
Acrylic on cardboard
~79 x 109 cm
PLATE 62

Circle 1986-9
1986
Acrylic on cardboard
79 x 109 cm
PLATE 63

Circle 1986-13
1986
Acrylic on cardboard
109 x 79 cm
PLATE 64

Circle 1989-1
1989
Acrylic on canvas
62 x 60 cm
PLATE 65

Circle 1986-16
1986
Acrylic on paper
109 x 79 cm
PLATE 66

Circle 1986-22
1986
Acrylic on paper
109 x 79 cm
PLATE 67

Circles 1986-24
1986
Acrylic on paper
109 x 79 cm
PLATE 68

Circles 1985-4 (B)
1985
Acrylic on canvas
165 x 116 cm
PLATE 69

Abstract 1990-3
1990
Acrylic on canvas
90 x 103 cm
PLATE 70

Abstract 1991-5
1991
Acrylic on canvas
131 x 131 cm
PLATE 71

Abstract 1990-4
1990
Acrylic on canvas
100.5 x 92 cm
PLATE 72

Abstract 1990-18
1990
Acrylic on canvas
160 x 135 cm
PLATE 73

Circle 1991-12
1991
Acrylic on canvas
75 x 75 cm
PLATE 74

Circle 1990-10
1990
Acrylic on fibre board
80 x 80 cm
PLATE 75

Flow 1990-1
1990
Acrylic on canvas
131 x 131 cm
PLATE 76

Abstract 1990-12
1990
Acrylic on canvas
90 x 80 cm
PLATE 77

Abstract 1991-1
1991
Acrylic on canvas
117 x 168 cm
PLATE 78

Abstract 1990-14
1990
Acrylic on canvas
90 x 120 cm
PLATE 79

Circle 1991-4
1991
Acrylic on canvas
218 x 200 cm
PLATE 80

Circle 1990-9
1990-1991
Acrylic on canvas
90 x 90 cm
PLATE 81

Abstract 1990-1
1990
Acrylic on canvas
132 x 132 cm
PLATE 82

Abstract 1990-7
1990
Acrylic on canvas
132 x 132 cm
PLATE 83

Everyone will die one day
1998
Acrylic on canvas
110 x 90 cm
PLATE 84

Talking with Hunan Peasants
1990-1991
Acrylic on canvas
164 x 117 cm
PLATE 85

Brilliance of the Yan'an
1994
Acrylic and textile on canvas
101 x 80 cm
PLATE 86

Mao's Birthday (Green)
1996
Acrylic on canvas
160 x 116 cm
PLATE 87

The lowly are the most intelligent; the elite are the most ignorant
1995
Oil on canvas
150 x 113 cm
PLATE 88

One is steel, one is food; with these we can accomplish anything
1995
Oil on canvas
150 x 113 cm
PLATE 89

Miracle on Earth
2012
Acrylic on canvas
136 x 172 cm
PLATE 90

We are getting better day by day
1994
Oil on canvas
136 x 172 cm
PLATE 91

Reminbi 2
1988
Oil on canvas
100 x 218 cm
PLATE 92

Reminbi 4
1988
Oil on canvas
100 x 218 cm
PLATE 93

Mao and the Statue of Liberty
1994-1995
Oil and pencil on cardboard
23 x 70 cm
PLATE 94

The Life of Mao
1991
Acrylic on canvas
95 x 210 cm
PLATE 95

Voting
1993
Acrylic on canvas
80 x 120.5 cm
PLATE 96

Do it yourself; be self-sufficient for food and clothing
2006
Acrylic on canvas
115 x 167 cm
PLATE 97

Mao and Flower Girl
1992
Acrylic on canvas
59 x 76 cm
PLATE 98

Wartime
1994
Acrylic on canvas
115 x 160 cm
PLATE 99

At the Tiananmen Gate
1990
Acrylic on canvas
131 x 160 cm
PLATE 100

This World is Yours
1994
Acrylic on canvas
117 x 158 cm
PLATE 101

Two Maos
1994
Acrylic on canvas
118 x 166 cm
PLATE 102

Mao Waving to the Future
1992
Acrylic on canvas
86 x 115 cm
PLATE 103

Mao and Red Scarf on Tiananmen 2
1997
Acrylic on canvas
115 x 160 cm
PLATE 104

Waving Mao 2
1995
Acrylic on canvas
144 x 131 cm
PLATE 105

Bright Days Ahead
1992
Acrylic on canvas
200 x 200 cm
PLATE 106

Mao and the Statue of Liberty 3
1995
Acrylic on canvas
110 x 90 cm
PLATE 107

Mao and the Statue of Liberty 1
1995
Acrylic on canvas
110 x 90 cm
PLATE 108

Mao and the Statue of Liberty 5
1995
Acrylic on canvas
110 x 90 cm
PLATE 109

Mao and the Statue of Liberty 2
1995
Acrylic on canvas
110 x 90 cm
PLATE 110

Mao and the Statue of Liberty 4
1995
Acrylic on canvas
110 x 90 cm
PLATE 111

Mao Waving (Red)
1992
Acrylic on canvas
167 x 119 cm
PLATE 112

Mao Portrait
Undated
Acrylic on canvas
110 x 90 cm
PLATE 113

Deng Xiaoping 2
1996
Acrylic on canvas
110 x 90 cm
PLATE 114

Deng Xiaoping 4
1996
Acrylic on canvas
110 x 90 cm
PLATE 115

Chairman Mao with Female Students
1995
Oil on canvas
175 x 137 cm
PLATE 116

Chairman Mao with Soldiers
1995
Oil on canvas
175 x 137 cm
PLATE 117

Ah! Us! 4
1998
Acrylic on canvas
112 x 136 cm
PLATE 118

Ah! Us! (Feng Mei)
2002
Acrylic on canvas
216 x 148 cm
PLATE 119

Ah! Us! (Beautiful)
1996
Acrylic on canvas
110 x 90 cm
PLATE 120

Ah! Us! (Us and Me)
2001
Acrylic on canvas
224 x 182 cm
PLATE 121

Ah! Us! (Two Dragons)
2001
Acrylic on canvas
177 x 227 cm
PLATE 122

Ah! Us! (Students)
2000
Acrylic on canvas
184 x 228 cm
PLATE 123

The people are the heroes of their time II-3
1997
Acrylic on canvas
110 x 90 cm
PLATE 124

The people are the heroes of their time II-1
1997
Acrylic on canvas
110 x 90 cm
PLATE 125

The people are the heroes of their time I-3
1997
Acrylic on canvas
120 x 160 cm
PLATE 126

The people are the heroes of their time I-4
1997
Acrylic on canvas
120 x 160 cm
PLATE 127

The people are the heroes of their time I-1
1997
Acrylic on canvas
120 x 160 cm
PLATE 128

The people are the heroes of their time I-2
1997
Acrylic on canvas
120 x 160 cm
PLATE 129

Purification of the Soul
2000
Acrylic on canvas
282 x 225 cm
PLATE 130

Ah! Us! 12
1998
Acrylic on canvas
190 x 151 cm
PLATE 131

Ah! Us! 7
1998
Acrylic on canvas
300 x 226 cm
PLATE 132

Ah! Us! 2
1998
Acrylic on canvas
302 x 218 cm
PLATE 133

Ah! Us! 9
1998
Acrylic on canvas
190 x 151 cm
PLATE 134

Ah! Us! 8
1998
Acrylic on paper
111 x 111 cm
PLATE 135

Ah! Us! 1
1991-1998
Acrylic on canvas
72 x 91 cm
PLATE 136

Ah! Us! 5
1998
Acrylic on canvas
158 x 117 cm
PLATE 137

Yimeng Mountain 2
2002
Acrylic on canvas
112 x 260 cm
PLATE 138

Yimeng Mountain 18
2006
Acrylic on canvas
Diptych, each panel 122 x 148 cm
PLATE 139

Yimeng Mountain 3
2002
Acrylic on canvas
126 x 268 cm
PLATE 140

Yimeng Mountain 22
2006
Acrylic on canvas
171 x 300 cm
PLATE 141

Yimeng Mountain 10
2003
Acrylic on canvas
94 x 149 cm
PLATE 142

Trees and Water
2004
Acrylic on canvas
104 x 150 cm
PLATE 143

Wheelbarrow and Me
2003
Acrylic on canvas
149 x 216 cm
PLATE 144

Yimeng Mountain 6
2002
Acrylic on canvas
140 x 260 cm
PLATE 145

Yimeng Mountain 23
2005
Oil on canvas
118 x 198 cm
PLATE 146

Garden Landscape 1
2004
Acrylic on canvas
105 x 194 cm
PLATE 147

Lotus 1
2006
Acrylic on canvas
90 x 70 cm
PLATE 148

Lotus 2
2006
Acrylic on canvas
90 x 35 cm
PLATE 149

Yimeng Mountain 1
2002
Acrylic on canvas
128 x 200 cm
PLATE 150

Yimeng Mountain 9
2003
Acrylic on canvas
148 x 236 cm
PLATE 151

Flowers of Yimeng Mountain
2005
Oil on canvas
108 x 199 cm
PLATE 152

A Pocket Western Art History about Mao: Georges Seurat
1999-2001
Acrylic on canvas
112 x 85.5 cm
PLATE 153

A Pocket Western Art History about Mao: Pablo Picasso
1999-2001
Acrylic on canvas
127 x 70 cm
PLATE 154

A Pocket Western Art History about Mao: Piet Mondrian
1999-2001
Acrylic on canvas
74 x 73 cm
PLATE 155

A Pocket Western Art History about Mao: Anselm Kiefer
1999-2001
Acrylic on canvas
116 x 160 cm
PLATE 156

A Pocket Western Art History about Mao: Lucio Fontana
1999-2001
Acrylic on canvas
80 x 46 cm
PLATE 157

A Pocket Western Art History about Mao: Vincent van Gogh
1999-2001
Acrylic on canvas
124 x 148 cm
PLATE 158

A Pocket Western Art History about Mao: Paul Gauguin
1999-2001
Acrylic on canvas
72 x 127 cm
PLATE 159

A Pocket Western Art History about Mao: Vincent van Gogh
1999-2001
Acrylic on canvas
110 x 90 cm
PLATE 160

A Pocket Western Art History about Mao: Alexander Calder
1999-2001
Acrylic on canvas
121 x 73 cm
PLATE 161

A Pocket Western Art History about Mao: Andy Warhol
1999-2001
Acrylic on canvas
150 x 150 cm
PLATE 162

A Pocket Western Art History about Mao: Tom Wesselmann
1999-2001
Acrylic on canvas
111 x 122 cm
PLATE 163

A Pocket Western Art History about Mao: Henri Rousseau
1997-2001
Acrylic on canvas
109 x 147.5 cm
PLATE 164

A Pocket Western Art History about Mao: Victor Vasarely
1999-2001
Acrylic on canvas
150 x 150 cm
PLATE 165

A Pocket Western Art History about Mao: Francis Bacon
1999-2001
Acrylic on canvas
59 x 42 cm
PLATE 166

A Pocket Western Art History about Mao: Paul Cézanne
1999-2001
Acrylic on canvas
110 x 90 cm
PLATE 167

2009.11.25
2009
Acrylic on canvas
164 x 149.5 cm
PLATE 168

2003.09.03
2003
Acrylic on canvas
45 x 65 cm
PLATE 169

2013.05.29
2013
Acrylic on canvas
150 x 150 cm
PLATE 170

2009.08.21
2009
Acrylic on canvas
240 x 200 cm
PLATE 171

2012.3
2011-2012
Acrylic on canvas
253 x 205 cm
PLATE 172

2008.04.20
2008
Acrylic on canvas
140 x 113 cm
PLATE 173

2008.06.27
2008
Acrylic on canvas
142 x 253 cm
PLATE 174

Untitled (2009.3-4.7)
2009
Acrylic on canvas
95 x 157 cm
PLATE 175

2008.01.18
2007-2008
Acrylic on canvas
59 x 49 cm
PLATE 176

2008.08.18
2008
Acrylic on canvas
170 x 220 cm
PLATE 177

2009.03.13
2009
Acrylic on canvas
130 x 160 cm
PLATE 178

2006.08.16
2006
Acrylic on paper
79 x 109 cm
PLATE 179

2007.12.12
2007
Acrylic on canvas
120 x 120 cm
PLATE 180

2007.12.03
2007
Acrylic on canvas
110 x 90 cm
PLATE 181

2007.06.13
2007
Acrylic on canvas
59 x 49 cm
PLATE 182

Untitled (2007-05)
2007
Acrylic on canvas
Five panels, each panel
~145 x 50 cm
PLATE 183

2007.11.30
2007
Acrylic on canvas
160 x 200 cm
PLATE 184

2007.09.28
2007
Acrylic on canvas
188 x 256 cm
PLATE 185

2007.06.20
2007
Acrylic on canvas
60 x 50 cm
PLATE 186

2007.06.30
2007
Acrylic on canvas
60 x 50 cm
PLATE 187

2007.10.06
2007
Acrylic on canvas
157 x 210 cm
PLATE 188

2007.09.17
2007
Acrylic on canvas
184 x 256 cm
PLATE 189

2013.12.13
2013
Acrylic on canvas
192 x 252 cm
PLATE 190

Selected Exhibition History

Solo Exhibitions

1996

La Maison de la Chine, Paris. Yu Youhan. 17 January – 27 February.

1998

Nikolaus Sonne Fine Arts, Berlin. Youhan. 28 May – 10 July.

1999

ShanghArt Gallery, Shanghai. Ah! Us! 18 – 28 November.

2004

ShanghArt Gallery, Shanghai. Yu Youhan: Landscape of Yi Meng Shan. 27 November – 26 December.

2008

Shanghai Art Fair, Shanghai. Yu Youhan: New Abstract Paintings. 9 – 13 September.

2011

ShanghArt H-Space, Shanghai. Yu Youhan's Paintings. 26 July – 20 August.

2012

Tian Ren He Yi Art Center, Hangzhou. Twin Cities — Solo Exhibition of New Chinese Painting: Yu Youhan – Homeland. 29 December, 2012 – 22 January, 2013.

2013

Yuan Space, Beijing. Yībān. 23 June – 7 September (catalogue).

Ren Space, Shanghai. Vision Out of Image – Yu Youhan Prints and Multiples. 22 September – 31 October.

Group Exhibitions

1985

Fudan University, Shanghai. Exhibition of 6 Painters.

1986

Shanghai Art Museum. Inauguration Exhibition of the Shanghai Art Museum.

Xuhui Cultural Centre, Shanghai. First Shanghai Concave-Convex Exhibition. 22 November – 1 December.

1988

Shanghai Art Museum. Exhibition of Today's Art.

1989

National Art Museum of China, Beijing. 1989 China/Avant-Garde Exhibition. 5 – 19 February (catalogue).

Tokyo Gallery, Tokyo. Chinese Contemporary Art. 5 – 19 February (catalogue).

1993

Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin. China Avant-garde. 29 January – 15 May (catalogue). Travelled to Kunsthall Rotterdam, 29 May – 15 July; Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 31 July – 17 October; Brandts Klaederfabrik, Odense, 13 November, 1993 – 6 February, 1994; Roemer-und Pelizaeus-Museum, Hildesheim, 12 September – 27 November, 1994.

Hong Kong City Hall, China's New Art, Post-1989. 31 January – 14 February; Hong Kong Arts Centre, 2 – 25 February (catalogue). Travelled to Vancouver Art Gallery, 12 April – 28 May, 1995; University of Oregon Art Museum, Eugene, 17 December, 1995 – 18 February, 1996; Fort Wayne Museum of Art, 13 March – 11 May, 1996; Salina Arts Center, 14 March – 11 May 1997; Chicago Cultural Center, 7 June – 8 August, 1997; San Jose Museum of Art, 5 September – 2 November, 1997.

Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. Mao Goes Pop, China Post-1989. 2 June – 15 August (catalogue). Travelled to National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

Cardinal Points of the Arts: La Biennale de Venezia. 14 June – 10 October (catalogue).

Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane. First Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art. 17 September – 5 December (catalogue).

1994

22a Bienal Internacional de Arte de São Paulo. 12 October – 11 December (catalogue).

1995

Göteborgs Konsthall, Gothenburg. Change - Chinese Contemporary Art. 28 January – 17 April (catalogue).

Centre d'Arts Santa Mònica, Barcelona. Des del Pais del Centre: Avantguardes Artistiques Xineses. 19 July – 30 September (catalogue).

1996

Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh. Reckoning with the Past: Contemporary Chinese Painting. 3 August – 28 September (catalogue). Travelled to Cornerhouse, Manchester, 2 August – 21 September, 1997; Otago Museum, Dunedin, New Zealand, 4 March – 3 May, 1998; Southland Museum and Art Gallery, Invercargill, 8 May – 15 June, 1998; Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch, 1 July – 6 Sept, 1998; Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North, 9 October – 6 December, 1998; Auckland Art Gallery, 19 December, 1998 – 28 February 1999; Waikato Museum of Art and History, Hamilton, 9 March – 18 April, 1999; Govett Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, 1 May – 13 June 1999; Suter Art Gallery, Nelson, 1 August – 6 September 1999.

1997

Sociedade Nacional de Bellas Artes, Lisbon. 15 Contemporary Chinese Artists. 21 October – 29 November (catalogue).

Galerie Rudolfinum, Prague. Faces and Bodies of the Middle Kingdom: Chinese Art of the 90's. 13 March – 1 June (catalogue). Travelled to OTSO Gallery, Espoo, Finland.

1999

Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Mao: From Icon to Irony – the Cult of Mao Zedong from the mid 1940s to the 1990s. 13 October, 1999 – 23 April, 2000.

2000

Contemporary Art Centre, Macau. Futuro e – Chinese Contemporary Art.

2001

Shanghai Art Museum. Metaphysics 2001: Shanghai Abstract Art Exhibition. February 2001.

Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, Sydney. Shanghai Star. 29 September – 29 October (catalogue, published in 2007). Travelled to Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, 31 October, 2001 – 24 November, 2002.

2002

Galerie Enrico Navarra, Paris. Made by Chinese #3 Chinese Pop. 12 February – 12 March (catalogue).

Espace Pierre Cardin, Paris. Paris-Pekin Chinese Contemporary Art Exhibition. 5 – 28 October.

2003

Beijing Tokyo Art Projects, Beijing. Prayer Beads and Brush Strokes. 26 July – 10 October.

2004

Museum of Contemporary Art, Marseilles. Chine, le corps partout? (China, the body everywhere?) 31 March – 30 May (catalogue).

Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin. Dreaming of the Dragon's Nation: Contemporary Art from China. 27 October, 2004 – 16 February, 2005 (catalogue).

2005

Kunstmuseum Bern. Mahjong: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection. 13 June – 16 October (catalogue). Travelled to Kunsthalle Hamburg, 14 September, 2006 – 18 February, 2007; University of California, Berkley Art Museum and Film Archive, 10 September, 2008 – 4 January, 2009; Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, 21 February – 17 March, 2009.

Shanghai Gallery of Art. Study – Practice: Current Paintings from Shanghai. 24 September – 31 October.

2006

Mingyuan Art Center, Shanghai. Shanghai Abstract Art Exhibition 2006. August.

Blue Space Gallery, Chengdu. Witness – Shanghai Masters Invitational Exhibition of Contemporary Art. 2 – 12 September.

2007

Lewis Glucksman Gallery, Cork. Year of the Golden Pig: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection. 13 March – 17 June.

National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, Taichung. Post-Martial Law vs. Post-'89 – Contemporary Art in Taiwan and China. 31 March – 17 June (catalogue).

Sifang Art Museum and Nanjing Square Gallery, Nanjing. Strategy on Paper – Works on Paper Invitational Exhibition. 21 – 29 April.

Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing. '85 New Wave: The Birth of Chinese Contemporary Art. 5 November, 2007 – 17 February, 2008 (catalogue).

2008

The Joan Miró Foundation, Barcelona. Red Aside: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection. 22 February – 25 May.

The Groninger Museum, Groningen. Writing on the Wall: Chinese New Realism and Avant-Garde in the Eighties and Nineties. 23 March – 26 October (catalogue).

Yuandian Gallery, Shanghai. Speed of the Flows: 2008 Contemporary Artist Invitational Exhibition of Nominated Artworks. 18 April – 18 May.

Shanghai Zendai Museum of Modern Art. Turn To Abstract – Retrospective of Shanghai Experimental Art from 1976 to 1985. 28 May – 20 June (catalogue).

Eye Level Gallery, Shanghai. Chengxiang, Eye Level Opening Exhibition Aquilaria Agallocha. 6 – 31 August.

Duolun Museum of Modern Art, Shanghai. Five Years of Duolun – Chinese Contemporary Art Retrospective Exhibition. 28 December, 2008 – 8 February, 2009.

2009

ShanghArt H-Space, Shanghai. Another Scene: Artists' Projects, Concepts and Ideas. 1 – 29 March.

Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane. The China Project. Three Decades: The Contemporary Chinese Collection. 28 March – 28 June.

Today Art Museum, Beijing. Yi Pai: Century Thinking. 1 – 22 June.

ShanghArt Gallery, Shanghai. On Paper: Group Show of ShanghArt Artists. 9 – 31 August.

Minsheng Art Museum, Shanghai. Warm Up. 18 August – 12 September.

436 Jumen Road, Shanghai. History in the Making: Shanghai 1979 – 2009. 9 September – 10 October.

Museum gegenstandsfreier Kunst, Otterndorf, Germany. Out of Shanghai. 31 October, 2009 – 10 January, 2010.

James Cohan Gallery, Shanghai. Santa's Workshop Shanghai: Selected works, toys and artists' editions. 12 December, 2009 – 30 January, 2010.

2010

Zendai Contemporary Art Exhibition Hall, Shanghai. San Sheng Wan Wu, Opening Exhibition. 8 September – 8 October.

Yuehu Museum of Art, Shanghai. Landscape in Transition – Yuzi Paradise International Art Symposium. 8 May – 31 October.

Today Art Museum, Beijing. Reshaping History: Chinart from 2000-2009. 25 April – 19 May (catalogue). Travelled to Arario Gallery, Beijing, 25 April – 19 May; China National Convention Center, Beijing, 4 – 21 May.

National Museum of Contemporary Art, Gwacheon, South Korea. Made in Popland. 12 November, 2010 – 20 February, 2011.

2012

Shanghai Gallery Alliance. Cultural Shanghai – A Return Oriented Towards the Future. 29 September – 29 October.

IG Halle, Kunst (Zeug) Haus, Rapperswil, Switzerland. 2 x Helbling Shanghai. Paul K. Helbling and Lorenz Helbling. 19 August – 8 October.

Minsheng Art Museum, Shanghai. Face. 10 March – 28 April.

2013

Yuehu Gallery, Shanghai. Shanghai, Nanjing, Chengdu, Fujian: Four Chinese Contemporary Artists. 1 May – 7 July.

ShanghArt Singapore. Re-Reading. 3 May – 7 July.

ShanghArt H-Space, Shanghai. Foundational Work. 9 May – 14 April.

Halcyon Gallery, Shanghai. Art 500 – Dimensions of Dialogue. 10 May – 30 June.

HOW Art Museum, Wenzhou. Four Quarters – 3-5-5-3: Exhibition Cycle of Chinese Contemporary Artists. 20 May – 20 July.

Shanghai Baoshan International Folk Arts Exposition. The Early Abstract Art in Shanghai – A Retrospective of Art History. 23 May – 16 June.

Arsenale di Venezia, Voice of the Unseen: Chinese Independent Art 1979/Today. 1 June – 24 November.

ShanghArt H-Space, Shanghai . Foundational Work II. 6 – 30 June.

Times Art Museum, Guangzhou. One Step Forward, Two Steps Back, Us and Institution, Us as Institution. 30 June – 11 August.

ShanghArt H-Space, Shanghai. Clutch. 6 September – 8 November.

China Art Museum, Shanghai. Shanghai/Paris, Modern Art of China. 7 January, 2013 – 30 May, 2014.

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Photograph Credits

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Numbers in italics refer to works of art.