

An Interview with Wang Jinsong

Eric Koehn
East Gallery, Taipei

After the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 a young generation of artists reflected China's new cultural environment in sardonic work, primarily paintings, that is now, as a group, called Cynical Realism. At the forefront of this generation is an artist named Wang Jinsong (王劲松) (b.1963). In this interview with the artist, I explore the relationship between the primary mediums that he uses — oil painting, photography, acrylic, and ink. The more we learn about his work, the more we can see that it offers an unusually wide variety of ways to look at the experience of his generation from a single point of view. Furthermore, we now have an opportunity to look at his work with the perspective that the past two decades provide. The interview with Wang Jinsong that follows took place April 23, 2014.¹

1. You began drawing at a young age, did you have the support of your family in becoming an artist?

No, not really, there was no one [that supported my interest]. Many families were poor in the sixties. At that time, our family had a lot of problems. No one in my family was really interested in art, but I liked to draw. I always had an interest in drawing. I became [more] interested when I was ten years old, because there were some political activities at school where people were needed to draw promotional material. The school would take a bunch of students who liked to draw or who could draw well, and then they would take them to participate in competitions or to create political artwork. We were a part of a group that promoted culture.

2. *So drawing was your interest?*

[Drawing] really was an interest. Just around middle school, China became more open, so we had the chance to take culture classes. Before that, other than political activities, there was no chance of taking any of those classes. I was about 11–13 years old. Yes, [drawing] was an interest. And my family was big—we had a lot of children—they didn't really care what we did. I was following my interests.

3. *As you explained in a 2011 interview,² while you were at university you were interested in the work of a French artist. Your interest was criticized by the faculty, yet you continued to follow your interest. What was the name of that artist and what interested you about his work?*

It's like this, we had a really nice library at the university with a lot of art books. And, I had such an interest in that. I believe at the time it was Picasso and Léger. And then there was another French artist who had an exhibition in The National Art Museum of China, but I can't remember his name. Even when I looked, I couldn't find it. He had an exhibition in Beijing and presented some stuff. Their [sic] works were being discussed in a magazine. At that time, those people did influence me.

4. *What inspired you most about the French artists?*

Their way of thinking, their technique, their work ethic, and most importantly, the formal construction of their art. Their work was very free.

5. *Was Henri Rousseau an interest?*

There was also Rousseau. They also had Rousseau, yes, yes, ... yes. So, when I was in college, [the French] were more influential. This is how it was at the time; French art was much more available. There was very little American art that came in.

6. *In school you learned about such thinkers as Kant and Hegel as well as Marx and Lenin, and Mao Zedong; do you believe the Western philosophical tradition has anything to say about your work?*

This, actually, is what the country's communist thought was like. Kant, Hegel, Marx, Lenin and Mao Zedong were really admired in our country. We started learning about them when we were young. They had the most impact on us and our political education. And then, Nietzsche and Sartre, were, to my future thinking, also very influential; Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus, their stuff, and existentialist, and nihilist thought.

7. *In 1993 you took part in the China Avant-Garde exhibit in Berlin,³ when you returned you stopped painting for a time. What was it about that exhibit that caused you to look for new directions in your art?*

It was the first time I had ever left China. And when I got west I saw so many museums. I went to a lot of other European countries and saw a lot of museums. [I] felt a lot of



fig 1, *Taking a Picture in Front of Tiananmen*, 1993
Wang Jinsong (b.1963) oil on canvas



fig 2, *In Front of Tiananmen*, 1964
Sun Zixi (b. 1929) oil on canvas

2. Wang, Jinsong. "乘物以游心 Taking Material to Heart." (Interview) artist.96hq.com/wangjinsong_2359/news/10509.html (accessed March 14, 2014).

3. Jim, Alice Ming Wai. "China's New Art, Post-89 (Hong Kong, 1993) and China Avant-Garde (Berlin, 1993)" in *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Chinese Culture*. London: Routledge, 2005.

"'China Avant-Garde', a similar retrospective exhibition [to 'China's New Art, Post-1989'-Hong Kong] organized by Hans van Dijk, Jochen Noth and Andreas Schmid for the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin (January 1993), brought the existence of Chinese avant-garde art to the attention of European audiences. Consisting of cinema, music, theatre, poetry and visual arts (sixteen avant-garde artists were featured), this exhibition attempted to relate Chinese experimental art since the late 1970s to other avant-garde movements in contemporary Chinese culture. It subsequently toured Rotterdam and Odense, and was reshaped to focus more on installation art for the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford."

stimulation. And then I thought, just drawing⁴ couldn't capture as much ... feeling, or passion, and when I got back, I tried a lot of new things. It wasn't really like looking for a new direction. It was finding how my heart had so many more feelings to express. And I needed to use other ways [than drawing] to express them, because drawing was merely one way of expression.

8. *Did that exhibit look at your work in any way that was different than how it had been looked at in China?*

It was pretty much the same. It was like this: the four curators of this exhibition were all westerners. And in China at the time, not many laypeople paid attention to avant-garde art. The majority [of the audience] were western artists and some academic scholars. [They] really liked it because the art there, to some degree, had more or less political influences [and] overtones, because it related to the contemporary political and social situation.

9. *Was your 1992 oil painting Taking a Picture in Front of Tiananmen⁵ (fig 1) part of the Berlin exhibition?*

This piece didn't show in the Berlin exhibition, but it did show in the Hong Kong exhibition *China's New Art Post-1989*⁶ ... these exhibitions occurred at the same time in early 1993.

10. *Your work is known for making art historical references. For example, Taking a Picture in Front of Tiananmen is known as a parody of Sun Zixi's 1963 oil painting In Front of Tiananmen. (fig 2) Can you discuss the relationship of your painting to Sun's?*

To the question you asked it is really quite similar, but portrayed differently, right? Because [Sun Zixi's] painting, at the time, was a product for the promotion of Chinese culture and from that perspective gave praise. But for me, it's the other side [sic]. It's a type of ... it's more casual, it's everyone's habit, because the people of the world are like this, when you travel, you always take pictures of places you go. So, when we were little and lived outside [Beijing],

Tiananmen was a place where we dreamed of going. So taking a picture in front of Tiananmen is a memory of a lifetime. Right now, it's still kind of the same. Those people have different identities, different clothes, different looks, different expressions ... Andy Warhol even took a picture in front of Tiananmen.

11. *A distinctive element of Taking a Picture in Front of Tiananmen is the select figures that are rendered only in line and white color. How can these ghostly drawn figures be interpreted?*

There are two reasons [for the figures]. ... When I started learning art, [I began with] ink painting, so I used a lot of brush strokes with white, empty space. Oil painting is full of colors, and back at the time I didn't have a background in oil painting. So I applied ink technique to the work. The other [reason] is, I feel art needs to give space for the audience to imagine.

12. *Some viewers could see an echo of the missing Shanghainese in the well-known 1943 painting Refugees by the painter Jiang Zhaohe.⁷ Would this additional reference be sensible?*

The painting [by Jiang Zhaohe] was created using water and ink calligraphic techniques. It depicts the disaster of the refugees' situations. When I did the Tiananmen picture, it was right when people had little choice to do what they wanted. They could not adapt. Because at the time, when society became more liberal, people's minds couldn't catch up, their thought processes were still the same as before. So all their facial expressions are kind of unnatural and their outfits are very awkward.

13. *Your later acrylic painting does not use ghostly figures but it does take full advantage of the open canvas. Did the use of areas of open canvas grow out of those earlier figures in oil?*

Yes. Yes. At the time when I drew the figures, the whole figure and scene was constructed theatrically like a show. And then, when I drew the new ones, they and my later

4. The word used by the artist in this situation was Huà, which describes both drawing and painting.

5. Wang Jinsong's oil painting *Taking a Picture in Front of Tiananmen* is commonly used to introduce descriptions of the Cynical Realism art movement.

6. Jim, Alice Ming Wai. "China's New Art, Post-89 (Hong Kong, 1993) and China Avant-Garde (Berlin, 1993)" in *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Chinese Culture*. London: Routledge, 2005.

"*China's New Art, Post-1989*, curated by Chang Tsong-zung and Li Xianting and co-presented by the Hong Kong Arts Centre, the Hong Kong City Hall and the Hong Kong Arts Festival Society in February 1993, was the first major survey exhibition of Chinese avant-garde art to take place outside of mainland China. ... The exhibition sought to sum up the cultural sensibilities emblematic of the

avant-garde in the 1990s, contrasting the more exhilarating but less focused explorations of the 1980s with works done in the intervening years between 1989 and 1991 in the post-Tiananmen era. Underscoring the current of malaise, disillusionment and cynicism that had followed the New Wave movement of the mid-1980s, it emphasized art as a force that developed creative responses to sociocultural situations. ... The exhibition adopted Li [Xianting]'s original terms Political Pop ... and Cynical Realism ... It featured fifty-one artists ... with examples of Political Pop and Cynical Realism dominating and attracting instant attention abroad."

7. *Refugees*, 1943, Jiang Zhaohe (1904-1986), ink and color on paper, National At Museum of China, Beijing

drawings changed because of the times. ... I wanted to make them the subject of the painting with more flexibility. The canvas became a big stage for expressive figures.

14. *So they are more dramatically expressive?*

Yes, yes, to reflect society's increasing tolerance. So they are each very rough, wild, coarse, to reflect their freedom: to earn their own money, to use their own words, and do what they want to do. So society has become more of a mixed salad bowl. It means that Eastern and Western thought ... uh ... is good, having the same thoughts is good, having different thoughts is also good, and that they can coexist together. This is a special period of social change in China. Right, it's really like that, for example, my oil painting *Da Fan Rong* or *Xing Fu Shi Hui*, [shows] people who are fighting, struggling. ... Some people have hope, some people are hopeless and they are all mixed up together. It's a series of different people who are fighting, swimming, wrestling—they're depictions of conflict. For example, in the [images of] swimming, there's a feeling of drowning, and how some people may float and some may sink (fig 3, 4).

8. Warren, Lynne. 2006. "Solarization". *Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Photography: Volume 3, O-Z*. New York: Routledge. 1459. — "In the early 1930s one of the most famous practitioners of this technique, Man Ray, was the first to use this term, which had previously been reversed to describe the intentional or accidental reversal of a negative image extreme overexposure."

15. *To my eye the acrylic figures have an almost metallic quality to how they're rendered. How does their style of rendering express the content of the work?*

Yes, it is like that, but I didn't intend to do that. I actually want to present the high contrast of people under the glaring sunlight. I got this [approach] from my later photography work. It was in the darkroom when I got the idea because of overexposure.⁸ So this inspired me. By manipulating the exposure you show a person's bright side or dark side.

16. *To what degree is photography part of your working process when you develop images in acrylic and ink?*

The way I create art, the thinking behind my work is holistic. For example, when I am doing photography I am also thinking of other forms of presentation. One aspect [of work] I like to think of is using different forms. ... When I find something interesting then I think about what the best way to present the idea will be. For example, if my artwork *Riddles* (fig 5) was presented with oil painting ... I would think it is not powerful enough. This [would be] the same [situation] ... with *Standard Family* (fig 6) and *100 Signs of Demolition* (fig 7).



fig 4, *Vent No. 3*, 2012
40 x 40 in., acrylic on canvas



fig 3, *Vent No. 8*, 2012
40 x 40 in., acrylic on canvas

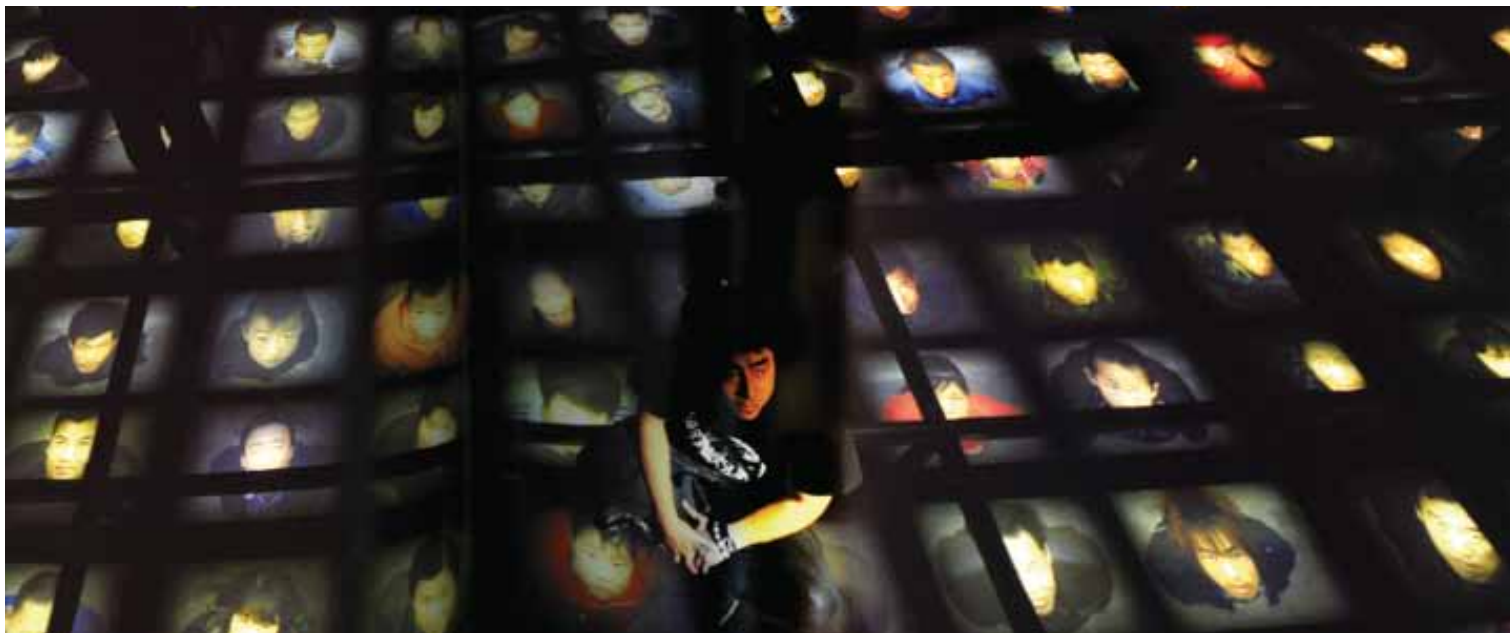


fig 5, *Riddles*, 2010
Wang Jinsong (b.1963) color photographs, installation



fig 6, *Standard Family*, 1996
Wang Jinsong (b.1963) color photographs



fig 7, *One Hundred Signs of Demolition*, 1999
Wang Jinsong (b.1963) color photographs

17. Your work is known for using a great variety of media. How has this variety helped you develop as an artist? Do you feel you have reinvented yourself with each new body of work or are these different ways of exploring recurring themes?

I hope to keep changing, perhaps that's my personality. I think I am not a laborer, but a thinker, therefore, I am always thinking more than doing. I create work based on feeling and the wish to inspire others. Because of the growing interest in commerce in China, most artists are painting to make money. But I am not one of them. After I complete a body of work, I usually won't revisit it. It's like this, I've never thought [sic]... Maybe this is the reason [I don't revisit work], when I was little and started drawing, then learned photography, performance art, installation art and other forms of art; I thought most practices were commonplace, therefore, I didn't limit myself to any single medium. I think about which idea is best suited to which medium.

18. Is photography always the first method you use to collect ideas?

Yes. I started with collecting ideas [using] photography for drawing. The more photos I took I realized, when the photos are displayed together [there] is a more powerful [and direct feeling] than [with] painting. [Photography] could really express my ideas and be accepted by audiences.

19. The Standard Family series of photos began in the preparation for drawing. After deciding that the photo provided a "direct feeling" of the people portrayed, the Standard Family series of photos was born. Does your evaluation of photography as being more direct than painting point to the greater abstraction, and less direct imagery, that you used in your later figurative work in acrylic versus the earlier oil paintings?

In comparison with other media, photography expresses the real picture to the audience. Such relative realism cannot be questioned. So I think the power of photography might be ... because drawing must be presented with a personal style, it always presents a personal point of view. Actually photography presents a common experience, because everyone has their own eyeballs to see the same phenomenon. It is a common experience. But drawing, through personal style, becomes a personal experience. So I believe I can use different styles [media] to express my ideas.

20. Are there art historical references in the acrylic works?

Very, very, few. Basically, when I created the acrylic work I had more freedom. I create my own work based on my own style. I try to avoid the style of other artist's in my work.

21. So are you referencing your own earlier work?

The way I think, the way I observe, the way I compose, definitely is related to earlier work, but the technique is different. Essentially, the way I present the figure has stayed the same, but the new technique produces a new realism. [Today] is not like the 1980s when the social environment was different.

22. Referring again to your oil painting, what gave you the first idea of using a populist subject? Are you interested in provoking interest in a particular set of issues or would you say you are more interested in the experience of daily life?

I'm still thinking it is like a salad bowl work idea. [My work] is addressing common human sensations such as struggle and conflict. So my work is not all about Chinese politics. More, it is addressing daily experience. My work is not particularly focused on the social situation because China's unique social situation has been gradually changing.

23. To what extent do all of these works come out of specific experiences?

Yes, [the work] does relate to personal experience. The news happens, society changes, so these experiences [I had] when growing up are related to the artwork I create.

24. How much of your work is autobiographical?

I think it's 80%. In one of the interviews I had before, I said I act like an observer; although I am observing other people's actions, I am one of them. I am also living in society. I also have those same human emotions. So now, I'm working on some of the ink painting where the subject is related to war. [This is] because of all the changes in the work include the news. Some of the news inspires me to do work.

25. Can you provide an example?

Oh I didn't actually experience war but I watch a lot of video about WWII history, as well as earlier history and current events.

26. Do you have a specific story?

How about ... Let me put it this way: In China, in the 1960s, there was the experience of famine and then in the 1970s Mao Zedong passed away. There has been more criticism [since then] and that includes criticism of Deng Xiaoping, Confucius, Zhou Enlai and the Tiananmen event. Specifically, I experienced the Tiananmen event after graduating from college and moving to Beijing. I felt individual power was small. Politics can kill everything. So, artists can only use painting to present their thoughts because they



fig 8, *Ink Landscape, No. 84*, 2012
Wang Jinsong (b.1963)
Ink on rice paper



fig 9, *Ink Landscape, No. 71*, 2010
Wang Jinsong (b.1963)
Ink on rice paper

have no other power. The political agenda can be more direct. Observing social phenomenon—such as the relationship between government and the people; the relationship between individuals and society, such as how to survive—all those ideas are presented in my work.

27. Your early oil paintings used a great deal of humor and absurdity mixed with seriousness, while your later work seems to have less humor. Would you agree with this description?

Yes. There is less humor in my later acrylic work, and it is more clear-cut, universal. In my earlier work, I used satire and a theatrical style to express potential conflict and protest. But I realized it was pointless to fight against some ideas. More stimulation should be offered. Including my photography work, I want to offer more people [sic.], so they can participate and think together with me, so people have the opportunity to think.

28. In the past you said your earlier work was intended to inspire others; can you elaborate on that statement?

Inspiration is the most important idea that I just mentioned, because people might not think about some problems when they are dragged around by everyday life. I discover problems through my eyes and express those problems [in my work] in order to stimulate everyone's reflection and broad discussion. So this might also be a future direction [for me].

29. In 2010, in the work Riddles you began placing photographs below the viewer. How did you arrive at the idea? Will it influence future work?

Yes, it will have an influence [on future work], because it is not the same [as earlier work]. I spent about two years finishing [*Riddles*]. In it I transform photography into installation art and create a space where audiences can temporarily play the role of God. All the faces under the audience's [feet] seem to be asking questions and starting conversations with each other. The presentation creates a live scene.

30. The faces selected for your work Riddles were the result of your insight that expressions narrowed the interpretation of the images. Would you agree with the statement that much of your photo work seems to hold back emotion and identity?

Right, this is what I want to express, because, if there is a favored expression [shown], it will lead the audience to a specific interpretation. Without such specific content, the audience has room for imagination. For example, even a westerner can see each face and each face will ask the same

questions: “What should I do?” “What should I be?” The work shows common human demands for all kinds of things. There is no specific direction. [The work] does not lead to specific content.

31. Is the individuality of each portrait lost within the large group? The separate boxes for each individual appear to emphasize the isolation of the subjects in all of your series of photos.

Actually, the box frame is invisible. Lighting illuminates the work and, frankly speaking, this creates the place of hell; each face is looking up for hope. *Riddles* was actually inspired by a poem by the famous historical poet, Qu Yuan.⁹ I am using the same title as his poem *Riddles*. He asked many concrete questions arising from his time period. Qu presented his work with words, and I present my work through the expressions in each [persons] eyes. My work creates many different possibilities. The frame of the box does create isolation and presents each person as an individual who is also lost within the large group. Each person suffers from constraints.

32. Repetition of imagery is a steady part of your work. It is present in both your photography and your acrylic painting. How important is it to think of the use of repetition in your work to understanding what you are doing?

Repetition is one of my styles. I believe that a single image doesn't have enough power and it cannot respond a big idea. There is a saying “repetition is power.” When I work on *Standard Family*, if I just use a single picture, it might leave the impression of a happy family. It would leave the impression of an ordinary picture. But when I bring together a number of family pictures, the work becomes a social statement. On one hand, the power is presented by the style; on the other hand, it's easier to engage people in the concept behind the social statement. For example *Standard Family* reflects the one child policy. A situation unique to China, this policy has quite an impact on Chinese culture. And it will create a great loss for Chinese society. The social structure and social relationships will change. For instance, in the future, people won't have uncles or aunts or nephews.

33. Scale also seems to be an important part of your work. *Riddles* uses life-size images. Can you talk about the relationship between audience and the scale of the work?

Back at that time, I was actually thinking that working with real people instead of photos would be more remarkable. But in reality as an artwork, it would be very difficult to manage. For that reason, I just wanted to have the frozen expression of their eyes life size, so the audience, who is above them, can recognize each [face] as equal in perspective and thus create the opportunity to start a conversation. If the scale of the faces is smaller than life size, the audience might have different feelings. Viewers might leverage their point of view [and] look at each face like an ant or small creature. When the scale is full size, viewers can feel the faces are real and [the people] live around them. Actually, the viewer who is looking at each face, who is asking questions, might [also] look up and address their own question to God. When the viewer is thinking of the questions of other people, they might raise their own question.

34. There is a clear love of materiality in your ink work, as expressed by your embrace of Xie He's six principles of Chinese painting.¹⁰ Does your embrace of his principles extend beyond ink?

I think Xie He's six principles [taken together] are the most complete idea in Chinese art. Because, not only does it [address] a world view, such as *Spirit Resonance*, this is the concept of art; but also it encompasses technique, *Correspondence to the Object*, when you draw something it needs to look like that thing. *Division and Planning*, this is built from all of your experiences. *Suitability of Type* is also built from long-term experience. When we started learning about western art, we were stunned that many [artists] lacked technic and skill. Also, when this hit China there where certain people in China who started learning this and working recklessly. They didn't follow any principle, no skill was present, no accumulation of personal spirit or experience and nothing else was offered. Therefore, I think the principles should be practiced, [they] make an artist more complete. Of course, I am not completely following all the principles, but I think the meaning of the principles is valuable for the entirety of life.

9. Crozier, Ralph. 1990. “Qu Yuan and the Artists: Ancient Symbols and Modern Politics in the Post-Mao Era”. *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*. (24): 25-50. — “For Chinese intellectuals, traditional and modern, Qu Yuan (338-278 BCE) has been one of the most enduring symbols of moral rectitude and creative genius in the face of political oppression.”

10. A more in-depth explanation of Xie He's (active ca. 479-502) Six Principles of painting can be found in Wen Fong's article “Chinese Painting Is History” — Fong, Wen C. 2003. “Why Chinese painting is history”. *The Art Bulletin*. 85 (2): 258-280.

35. Do you use a sketchbook?

Very little. I create work without drafts. I have never liked to draft. Actually, I like to create work in an impromptu manner. But [my] development of photography is different. Photography is more rational. I have to think about the idea for a long time and do a lot of tests, and then I can finish up the work all at once. The function of a sketchbook is to focus more on practicing technique and skill. I am professionally trained; I think it is not necessary for me. I think I can manage my own image, composition very well. When I am creating ink or acrylic work, I work in an impromptu manner and control the image based on my skill and experience. This is my habit of working. [Metaphorically] I think the water in the cup is the base, when the water overflows the cup, it is art. The water that has not overflowed relates to the accumulation of past experiences. The water that overflows is what is meaningful to the present. This simple example might not be [completely] apt, but I think it is acceptable.

36. Would it be wrong to see parallels between the subject matter of your ink work and that of the Lingnan School painter Gao Jianfu?¹¹

It might not be similar. I saw his work before. Although his style is, his work presented landscape (flowers) and dream-like images. My ink works are not related to peaceful images—they are all about war, battle, fighting, disaster—I even painted a flower, withered.

37. What are you working on now?

[Currently], I am doing ink and acrylic work. Because painting always needs time to process and realize, I am using the time to think. During the creation period, it might inspire more ideas. Photography is a different kind of work though; it can be finished up very quickly after everything is done. Not many galleries like to work with me because of my freedom, of my time-consuming thinking [and] work process.

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11. Gao Jianfu (1879–1951) developed a novel national painting style that joined traditional and modern artistic practice inspired by Japanese Nihonga painting. "Western elements such as foreshortening perspective, and light and shade, fill his work with power and drama. ... In his own mind this modernized version of Chinese painting was a form of revolutionary art that paralleled his commitment to radical political change." (*Modern China* 35.) The politically charged content of Gao's 1932 *Flying in the Rain* is of particular interest when looking at Wang's ink paintings that also contain modern military aircraft subject matter rendered in ink.