



Advisory Perspective

Xiyao Wang in the Studio

By [Annabel Downes](#) | Berlin, 31 January 2023

If you are unfamiliar with [Xiyao Wang](#)'s lyrical abstractions, her upcoming exhibitions will provide an opportunity to understand the rising international interest in her paintings.

First up on the Berlin-based artist's 2023 itinerary is her U.K. solo exhibition, *A Carnival in the Forest* (9 February–25 March 2023) at Massimo De Carlo, London, presenting seven paintings that render memories of a summer past.

Following in quick succession are solo shows at [KÖNIG GALERIE](#) Berlin, in March; [Perrotin](#) Seoul, in July; [Tang Contemporary Art](#) Beijing, in December, and Perrotin New York, in January 2024, in addition to appearances at major global fairs.



Xiyao Wang, *The lake I flew over no.4* (2022). 200 x 190 cm. Courtesy the artist and MASSIMODECARLO.

Ahead of her opening in London, Wang speaks with us from her Berlin studio to discuss her upbringing in a small mountain town on the Yangtze River and the summer that inspired her latest body of work.

You are based in Berlin, but you grew up in a country town on the Yangtze River, southwest China, with your father who is also an artist.

Could you tell us about this upbringing and the influence it's had on your work?

It's only once you leave your hometown, the culture, and the world you used to live in that you realise the influence it's had on you.

My hometown is a small mountain town to the southwest of the city of Chongqing. The landscape on the Yangtze River is very dramatic with green jagged mountains. Our free time was filled with long walks up and down the mountains.

In Berlin, I'm living in a totally new world—the culture, people, weather, and language—it's all different. I didn't realise how special my hometown was until I moved to Germany in 2014.

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Xiyao Wang Studio. Courtesy Xiyao Wang and Perrotin.

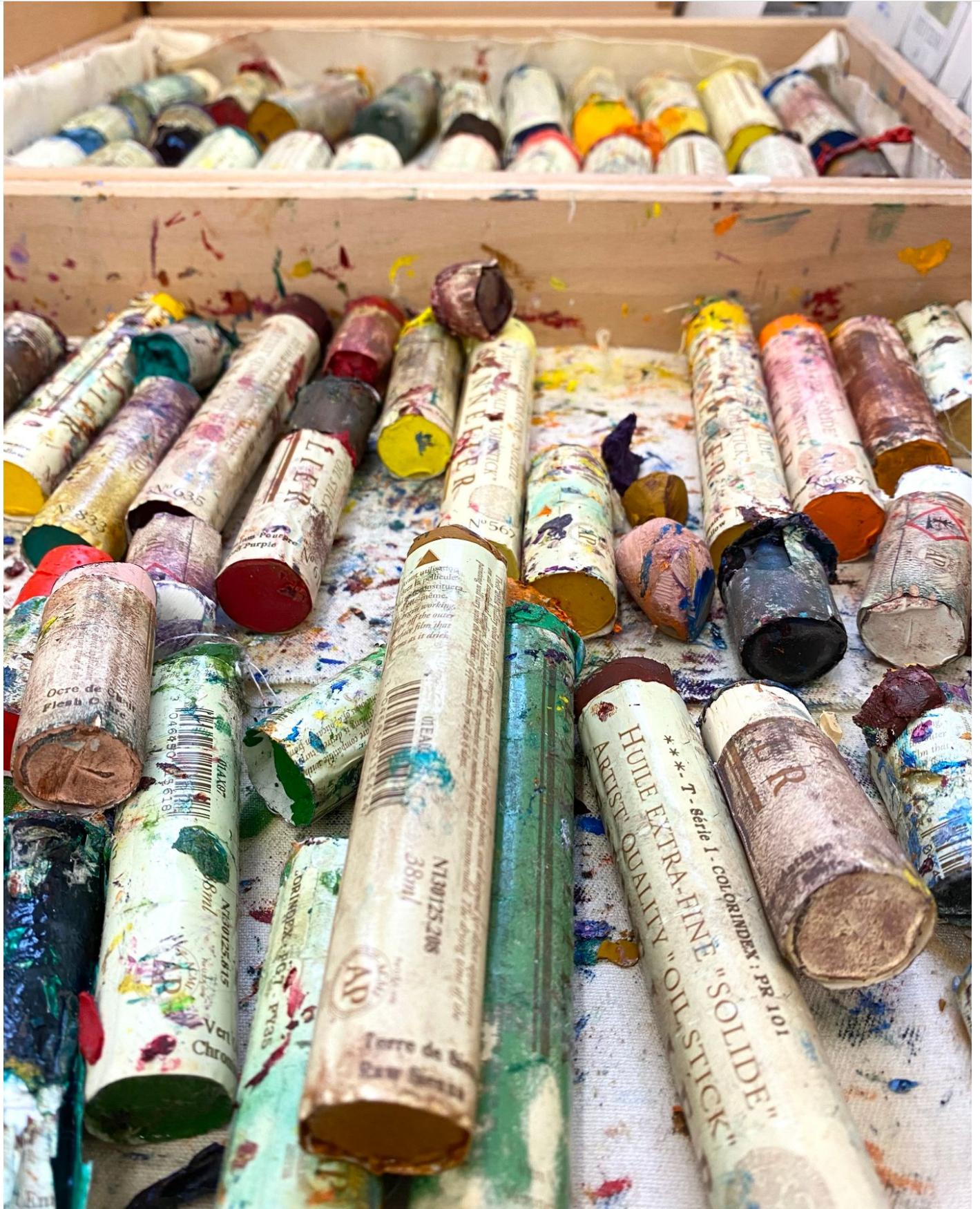
My father is also an abstract painter who introduced me to painting. When I was little, he read me stories about [Van Gogh](#), [Monet](#), and [Gauguin](#) before bed and we flicked through his library of catalogues about Western painting and Chinese traditional ink painting. He was my teacher; now I am his.

What's a typical day at the studio like?

I normally get up around eight or nine. Then it's breakfast, emails, and meetings. If I have no meetings, I will spend the morning reading books on mainly philosophy or art. I appreciate this time when it's just me mulling over the words of great thinkers.

Afternoons and nights are the best time for me to paint. Some of my best paintings were done at night because it's always so quiet and I have the whole time to myself.

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Xiyao Wang Studio. Courtesy Xiyao Wang.

Do you also prefer to work in silence?

Sometimes I listen to music, the genre really depends on the situation—sometimes electronic, sometimes Chinese music, piano, cello, as well as jazz and tango.

Does the music play into your paintings?

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was listening to German musician AIVA NOTO a lot.

However, music has had less influence on my work, as I try to be independent of everything around me. Nowadays, if I am listening to music while painting, it's to help me get into the rhythm of painting. Once there, everything around me is not so important—the sound of music, the space, the room—I just concentrate on the painting itself.

You describe your work as 'a nearly bodiless process, as if [your] soul is floating in the air while everything else becomes unimportant'. Can you expand on this?

I love it when your body feels totally free—when you're flying or swimming, for instance. I get a similar feeling when I paint. I don't feel my weight, height, or the size of my body; I just follow my thoughts and soul at that moment, leading me across the canvas.

In your free time, you enjoy ballet, tango, kickboxing, and yoga. Do these practices connect to your paintings?

All these body movements are related to different strengths and speeds, which plays into the gesture of my paintings organically.



Xiyao Wang, *Like a Firefly Chasing the Waves no.3 (2022)* (detail), 200 x 190 cm. Courtesy the artist and MASSIMODECARLO.

Painting, on the other hand, is much more freeing because you don't have to care about the movement, speed, or sound.

I like painting on a big canvas because of that boundless feeling. One of the paintings I'll be showing in London is over four metres long.

Could you say more about your works and the poem you wrote in connection to the Massimo De Carlo show?

At the end of the summer, sitting in my studio in Berlin, I wrote a poem about my experiences and stories from previous months. I had been in Milan for *What You See Is What You Get* (30 June–29 July 2022), the group show with Massimo De

Carlo, and visited Venice for the Biennale, while also spending time in Berlin.

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watching sunsets pierce through readened clouds—play into each line of the poem.

The exhibition title *A Carnival in the Forest*, for example, recalls a time dancing with friends in the warm summer sun, and reconnecting with the nature around me.



Xiyao Wang Studio. Courtesy Xiyao Wang and Perrotin.

Writing poems is something I've been doing from a young age, as my father also liked to write. I always have someone that I can share them with.

I've never shown my poems or writing to the public as it's sometimes difficult to translate them from Mandarin to English. I also didn't want people to connect them to my paintings; the words and paintings exist as their own beings. However, this time, it felt okay as it was about my summer.

As for the works, you will notice how backgrounds in this series are almost empty and I've used more orange. Massimo's wall in London is a brilliant emerald green, which I loved, but it was also a challenge for me. I think orange will work well with the green.

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Xiyao Wang, *The Crystalline Moon Palace no.6* (2022). 200 x 190 cm. Courtesy the artist and MASSIMODECARLO.

Could you speak about the Taoist influence in these works?

Taoist practitioners in China build up a connection with the universe through the environment—the waterfalls, weather changes, and river tides that surround them. For them, it's not quite necessary to connect with people in the world. They prefer to enjoy their own souls, bodies, and solitude.

When I am in the studio, I have the same outlook. Berlin is a major contemporary art hub—many artists from all over the world live here and plenty of art events pop up daily. However, when I am in the studio, I'm totally in my own world, it's like an uninhabited island. I watch the wind blow, the leaves fall, and the flowers open.

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Xiyao Wang Studio. Courtesy Xiyao Wang and Perrotin.

Do you paint outside?

During art school in China, we spent a lot of time painting outside. We would take our materials into the countryside and paint the mountains, the people walking through, and the old wooden buildings. I loved it because I learnt to paint what I saw, but I could still combine it with my vision. David Hockney was a big influence in that sense. He paints stunning landscapes as he sees them—changing reality into unique landscapes.

With four solo shows scheduled this year, how will you approach them? As one cohesive body, or does each tell a different story?

While all my paintings are based on my experiences and inspirations, each show is centred around the new city, gallery, and room. Every exhibition will come with a surprise, whether it's colour, size, movement, or style.

I am currently preparing for the KÖNIG GALERIE show in March, for which I've been developing a new style. And actually, I just found what I wanted last week. —[O]

Main image: Xiyao Wang Studio. Courtesy Xiyao Wang and Perrotin.

SELECTED WORKS BY XIYAO WANG