

Representing
and
Interpreting
Abstraction
Today

Edited By
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China, artists were likewise attracted by styles they encountered, from academic Abstraction, however, was poorly received, gradually changed with the introduction of the Abstract Expressionists, which among the traditional language of Chinese ink and 1980s, Wu Guanzhong (1919-2010) in China desiring to move beyond the long landscape painting. He began to draw inspiration in order to create works that would be form. By marrying eastern tradition with he actually found his own path to abstraction.²⁸ He studied both Chinese and western painting at the Academy of Art from 1936 to 1942. In 1947, he won a scholarship to study at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where he took a great interest in the Post-Impressionism, and also familiarized himself with the principles of aesthetic formalism. After his return to China, he taught at the Fine Art Department in Beijing, where he taught from 1949 to 1953. The academy was dominated by social-realist painting, which was dramatically interrupted by the Cultural Revolution; only after Mao Zedong's death in 1976, did the art world begin to change. In the arrangement of color and form, he was influenced by a western approach to painting and ink drawing – with the goal of modernizing Chinese painting, which was of the same face.²⁹ In Shanghai searching for an individual artistic expression³⁰, which offered a means of opposition to the dominant style. Many of the Shanghai artists worked with ink on canvas and ink on rice paper. Using lines, dots, and shapes, their abstract works were often interpreted and could be understood in a Western historical and philosophical context. A group of younger artists emerging in the mid-to-late 1980s formed the '85 New Wave Movement.³² By the 1990s, abstract practices in China had become a growing phenomenon, representing both the initial resistance to and the general transformation process of

Between Cultural Tradition and Artistic Innovation: Contemporary Abstract Voices

The cross-cultural dialogue in abstraction today is perhaps captured best in the work of non-western artists positioned between their own cultural traditions and their intensive studies of western art practices. In conclusion, I want to look at the work of two emerging voices in contemporary abstraction, Tarini Ahuja and Xiyao Wang, born and educated in India and China respectively. Each is exhibiting internationally,³³ thus they are a part of the global art world of the 21st Century. Tarini Ahuja's development as a painter was shaped by the work of the Progressive Artists' Group of Mumbai, but also by the painterly approaches of western abstract artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, Joan Mitchell, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Cy Twombly.³⁴ Born in New Delhi in 1990, she pursued her undergraduate studies at Lasalle College of the Arts in Singapore and then continued her artistic training at Goldsmith's, University of London, where she graduated with a BA (Hons) in Fine Arts in 2013.³⁵ Abstraction, she has indicated, offers her a way to capture in her paintings the ephemeral, fleeting moments of everyday life. Her approach is informed by Eastern philosophy, above all the Japanese concept of *mono no aware* – an awareness of the impermanence of things and the powerful emotions this notion generates with our awareness of the transient lives we lead, and the memorable moments contained in them.³⁶ In her first solo exhibition at the India International Centre in New Delhi in 2015, she explored the Japanese concept of *wabi-sabi*, a world view and aesthetic approach that centers on an acceptance of nature's fragility, transience, and imperfection. Thus, the beauty of *wabi-sabi* lies in its ambiguity; it is a way to find beauty and harmony in what is simple, modest, and mysterious.³⁷ In her most recent, second solo exhibition in New Delhi, she explored the musical notion of *adagio*, a tempo marking indicating a passage to be played slowly, leisurely, and gracefully. *Adagio* as a creative principle enables her to slow down the artistic process and reflect upon her approach of working with her hands, making marks that are luscious and intuitive.³⁸ Ahuja's focus is on the creative process; the act of painting is a deep exploration of the mesmeric language of abstraction. She generally begins with an elaborate outline of color schemes and compositions, which allows her to explore various scenarios and formal problems.³⁹ She builds structures and simultaneously obliterates them, intuitively layering paint. In this process, color is a crucial element in her work and an ever-evolving source of inspiration. She spends days creating elaborate palettes and mapping out color tones to capture in her dreamlike polychromatic works the fleeting moments of everyday experiences. Ahuja paints with complete sense of awareness and constant

reflection. She enjoys the tactile nature of painting and the paradox of an approach where impulse and control, calm and chaos, go hand in hand. Acknowledging a direct link between slowness and memory, she explores in her paintings ideas such as stillness, impermanence, and restraint, which she captures with sensuous lines and intuitive marks. Furthermore, she sees abstract painting as an alternative approach to dealing with the intense medial realities of the digital age. Abstract painting offers an alternative, a way to slow things down and invite us to reflect on the physical presence.⁴⁰

For Xiyao Wang, abstract painting is also the most adequate and direct form of expression; it is movement captured onto large canvases, expressing a feeling of boundlessness and *joie de vivre*. Born into an artist's family in Chongqing, China, in 1992, Xiyao Wang pursued dance, poetry, and the visual arts from an early age. From 2010 to 2014, she studied printmaking at the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, where she received classical art training including a wide variety of technical skills as well as an introduction to Chinese and western art history.⁴¹ Her first encounter with western modernism was a catalogue of works by Paul Klee which she received as remuneration for one of her prints in 2013. Her subsequent encounter with Neo-Expressionism provided her with an artistic approach that would enable her to transfer her own feelings and thoughts onto the canvas.⁴² In 2014, she moved to Germany, where she continued her studies at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste (HFBK) in Hamburg under Werner Büttner, one of the protagonists of Neo-Expressionism, and Thilo Heinzmann, and also studied in performance artist Jochen Dehn's class. A recipient of a Karl H. Ditze Foundation and DAAD PROMOS scholarship in 2018, she continued her studies in the MFA program at the State University of New York at Purchase, using her study trip to intensively engage with Abstract Expressionism, which became a major influence upon her own development as a painter. She completed her studies in painting under Anselm Reyle in Hamburg, receiving her MFA in 2020, and currently lives in Berlin.⁴³

Here, too, the artist's main concern is with the creative process: for Xiyao Wang this usually originates from a point of intense inspiration, triggered either by external impressions or by her own thoughts and feelings. The inspiration defines her choice of artistic means and leads directly to her exploration of color, line, and form. Immersing herself in the creative process on the large-scale canvas in front of her, she feels free from all constraint and lets the lines develop and weave together as if in a constant state of flow, transformation, and flight. She has described her artistic work as a nearly bodiless process, as if her soul were suspended in the air.⁴⁴ Her works arise from the dialogue between the expressive gestures of her body as she paints, and the resulting marks generated on the large canvases (Fig. 2).

Xiyao Wang combines various techniques including painting, charcoal, graphite, and oil sticks. The expressive multi-colored lines, layered on or pure white backgrounds, produces lyrical, natural movement and atmospheric effect landscapes.⁴⁵ The movement of her lines varies of the canvas, thus turning her paintings into weightlessness and infinity. Her profound knowledge of eastern and western artistic traditions enables her to draw inspiration from Taoism, but also dance. She succeeds in marrying a Neo-Expressionist approach with eastern artistic traditions. The large-scale works enable her to break free but also sweeps the viewer to unlock their own imaginative spaces, themselves, and associate it with their own. For both artists, abstraction is a way to develop their own individual artistic language. Building on traditional and intellectual traditions and drawing from various movements, focusing particularly on color and the slowness of the line, they have developed an abstraction that speak to both western

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Fig. 2 Xiyao Wang, *River, River, Could You Tell Me the Story of My Hometown No.1*, 2022, acrylic, oil stick on canvas, 330 x 680 cm | Panel (each): 330 x 170 cm. Courtesy Perrotin and the artist

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Representing and Interpreting Abstraction Today encompasses a variety of opinions, studies, and research regarding the heterogeneity of ways to conceive and represent abstraction in contemporary times. Through two main thematic threads — one concerning representation and, more broadly, painting, and the other pertaining to the semantic and interpretative implications of the concept of abstraction in technology — the timeliness of the topic in recent years is underscored.

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