

## The Bad and Beautiful Paintings

By Carol Yinghua Lu

Wang Xingwei is undoubtedly a good painter. Without considering his nationality, we can almost place him in the league of such “bad painters” as Martin Kippenberger that made good art by flaunting outrageous taste and sardonic content. True to the nature of “bad paintings”, Wang is prone to depicting scenes that are ambiguous, irrelevant, absurd, vulgar, scandalous and laughable. A hole-in-the-wall hair salon lit in dim pink light, a woman whose kimono torn wide open in the lower end and hands tied in the back, sitting on the floor, across from a well-dressed man sitting indifferently in a sofa, a group of penguins standing around and looking at a panda lying on the ground, an air hostess suspended from a tree on the edge of a cliff, a seaman standing in the middle of a small pool with a life buoy around his waist with the pool water barely up to his knees, a nurse dressed in a sexy body-hugging uniform and black high heels sitting in a black sofa staring aggressively ahead. The plots are often unexpected, clearly far-fetched and non-existent, yet charmingly surreal and deliciously juicy. If Wang Xingwei were a fiction writer, he would write damn good stories even though none of them would sound convincing.

In the early phase of his career, Wang Xingwei lived in the small city of Haicheng in the harsh climate of north China, yet he drew freely from an extensive mixture of classical and popular art-historical sources, kitsch and traditional images, archetypal and personal fantasies. In his paintings, the artist mixed his source materials with gusto as well as a heavy dose of dark humor. There existed great disparities between what people imagined of his life in Haicheng – he had a quiet family life with his wife and son, teaching and painting, and how he fantasized his own world and the world around him in his paintings – he appeared again and again on canvas as a scolding father, a burglar in the act of breaking open a door, or Chairman Mao.

Actually, you don't really need to be a historian or an art expert to be attracted by Wang Xingwei's paintings. The attraction is both instant and long-lasting. And you wonder why. While the artist dutifully fulfills the expectation of his audience by sustaining a narrative aspect in his work, it belies his well-designed aesthetic. His construction is perfect, both balanced and harmonious. Yes, harmonious, a quality that evokes Renaissance Art, in which pictorial composition played an important role. “Construction is the synthesis of the manifold at the expense of the qualitatively different moments that come under its sway, and also at the expense of the subject that sacrifices itself while accomplishing the synthesis.”<sup>1</sup> It's the synthesis that the artist has arrived at and that what you are staring into. Forget about the content. You like his paintings because they simply have a “good” look.

The figurative elements in Wang Xingwei's paintings, which are torn from their original context, become “the aesthetic subject”. The artist thus gains ultimate freedom in choosing what goes into his paintings: historical figures, seaman, nurses, soldiers, scenes from fairy tales, penguins, pandas, a manhole, a landful of watermelons, anything goes, as long as Wang sees them fit into his narrative and formal fabrications. Although his early output made asides to recognizable images, anecdotes, events and famous works from the Western art history, which made itself susceptible to easy reading, he's since moved further and further away from this accountable source, and instead uninhibitedly invents scenarios and plots completely from the thin air. It's almost hopeless to identify a unifying theme in each stage of his production and it's equally impossible and meaningless to predict what he will depict next. “Construction is the vehicle whereby art can, under its own steam, move beyond its nominalistic and contingent situation towards some over-arching validity, call it universality.”<sup>2</sup> Don't even bother to work out what the artist wants to convey through his paintings. “By paring down the elements, the reductive moment of construction tends to diminish their potency to the point where a victory over them is an all-too-easy triumph.”<sup>3</sup>

His style slides among realism, expressionism, constructivism, comic strip and caricature. He takes meticulous efforts and precision also to visualize the settings in each of his paintings, a strategy that enriches their pictorial content and heightens the overall visual appeal. While contributing to the story-telling of his paintings, the details in the backgrounds are an important formal vehicle through which the artist arrives at his vision of a perfect painting.

It seems that the artist is forever driven subconsciously by a longing for a kind of classic and timeless quality in his work. Let's not overlook the fact that Wang Xingwei, born in 1969, spent his formative years in the idealistic 80s in China. It was a time when after the former decades of complete rejection and erasure of intellectuality,

Chinese intellectuals were eager to reestablish their elitist position in the society. The country was recovering from the political turmoil and economic stagnation of the previous years. As the social climate became relaxed and open again, the population was searching for spiritual guidance and role models. Could intellectuals take such a lead? How could they step up into such a role? They must formally ascertain their authority again and install among the general public a respect for formality and intellectuality. For instance, to reassert the appeal of visual art, the classical and enduring aesthetic quality could guarantee elicit sensual empathy and convert believers. It was almost more important to comply with than to defy such conventional aesthetic standards.

Wang Xingwei's prolific practice took off in the mid and late 1990s. At that time, Chinese contemporary art world has been through the conceptually charged 85 Movement where Chinese artists had a crash course in and actively experimented with Western modernist art forms, the "new generation" of painters who emerged in the early 90s, took their subject matters from their immediate reality and visualized them in their works with great precision, the political pop and cynical realism artists who thrived in poking fun and offering critique of the political history and reality of China, the kitschy art that celebrated vernacular and folk aesthetics, and the rise of conceptual photography that portrayed the reality in a highly postmodern fashion. While geographically removed from the epic centers of all these movements, which tended to take place in major coastal and inland cities, Wang Xingwei wasn't immune to their influences. Yet it was impossible to categorize him according to any of these genres.

Wang was someone who emerged in the transitory period in Chinese art history when artists were shifting their focus from being socially and politically engaged to an inward gaze into their personal world. What Wang Xingwei's works corresponded to, however, was a growing awareness among a younger generation of contemporary artists, of the everyday life instead of the society at large or the political reality. As the country was steered onto a track of fast economic development and drastically improved living conditions, individual beings were given more weight. The emergence of conceptual photography and video art around this time also enabled artists to look more closely into their microscopic existence and the everyday for inspirations and basis for their creations. Domestic scenes and personal fantasies in Wang Xingwei's paintings fed into such a fascination and appealed to many.

Since 2002, Wang Xingwei was relocated to the southern city of Shanghai, deliberately placing himself into a completely different cityscape with an equally foreign dialect and life style unfamiliar to him. The explosive commodity culture and gentle climate of Shanghai brought new stylistic possibilities (he experimented with painting on corrugated boards and bright colors) and subject matters (there were depictions of colorful flowers, romantic scenes and portraits of Michael Jackson, for instance) into his works. Recently he moved again, his entire family to Beijing, exposing himself to another radically different cityscape and way of living. While his aesthetic instinct continues to rule his canvases, we are looking forward to the stimulation of a new everyday life to reveal itself in his practice.

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<sup>1</sup> "The ugly, the beautiful and technology", *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodor W. Adorno, Gretel Adorno, C. Lenhardt, Rolf Tiedemann, P 84, published by Routledge, 1984

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.