

Wang Xingwei

2013.5.19 - 2013.8.18



Wang Xingwei, *Untitled (Watering Flowers)*, 2013, oil on canvas, 240 x 200 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Galerie Urs Meile.

UCCA

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GUY & MYRIAM ULLENS

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Since the mid-1990s, Wang Xingwei (b. 1969, Shenyang; lives and works in Beijing) has pioneered a distinctly compelling painterly vision. Like all painters of his generation, he is heir to the grand tradition of Socialist Realism that forms the basis of most artistic training in China even today. Having mastered the grammar and vocabulary of this mode, Wang is both reflexive about the visual language he has inherited, and inventive in its deployment. Drawing on a uniquely witty, quirky sensibility, in the past two decades he has created a wide-ranging body of work that links intelligently to its Western referents, revolutionary precedents, and immediate cultural context.

Throughout his career, Wang Xingwei has consistently asked the question: How does painting create meaning? Beginning with his early usage of images and compositions from art history, through a string of experiments with the physical stuff of the medium itself, and into a current phase where unlikely connections emerge among a universe of recurring motifs and archetypes, Wang has explored big ideas: self-becoming, social relations, knowledge, love. He has quoted relentlessly and ecumenically, taking not only scenes and characters, but entire styles and traditions as the objects of his appropriation. He has tempered this borrowing with a subtle sense of repetition and variation, and always with a sharp sense of humor.

This exhibition is organized not by subject matter or chronology, but by the relationship of painter (or viewer) to the painted (or viewed). Three major divisions separate the 74 works into rear views, profile views, and frontal views, in sections titled simply BACK, SIDE, and FRONT. Within each of these major groupings, smaller clusters appear, with juxtapositions that serve to show how

a particular theme has evolved—or how a particular motif has appeared and reappeared—over periods ranging from months to decades.

With such diverse references, Wang Xingwei's work defies the possibility of a comprehensive gloss. Wang's paintings are projections of a post-canonical moment where source material comes from increasingly obscure and mundane places. No one could be expected to trace the origin of all of these citations, nor are complete notes necessary for the understanding or enjoyment of the paintings. In Wang's world, the most basic tenets of painting undergo a thorough questioning, emerging retooled for our current moment. His work ultimately suggests that there is still a place for the delights of figuration and narrative, even in an era, and a context, where greater structures of meaning and belief can seem dubious.

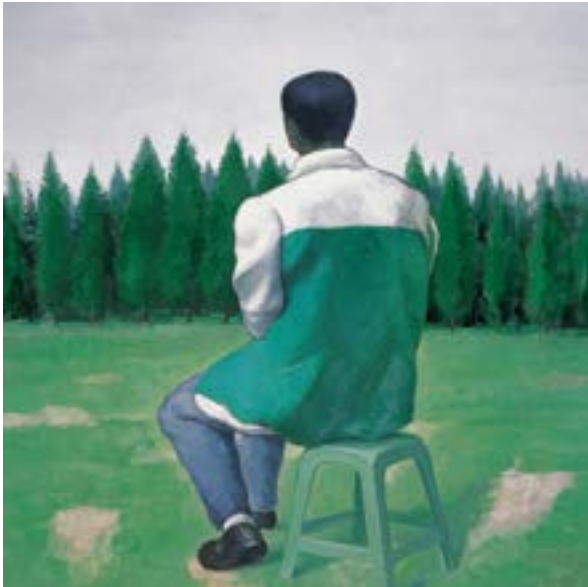


This exhibition is organized by UCCA Director Philip Tinari and generously supported by Galerie Urs Meile and Qiao Zhibing, with additional support from the Fondation Guy & Myriam Ullens.

BACK

“I am a painter, and I don’t think that painter and artist are exactly the same thing.”

Wang Xingwei’s rear views reveal fundamental tendencies in the artist’s practice. *Poor Old Hamilton* (1996) and *Untitled (Watering Flowers)* (2013) both focus on the central character of the purple-suited man. In the 1996 painting, he scolds a child who appears to have broken Duchamp’s masterpiece *The Large Glass*; in the 2013 version he waters the flowery head of a woman who appears elsewhere in the exhibition. Four paintings from Wang’s iconic mid-1990s series of self-portraits in a yellow shirt show him in a wedding photographer’s studio, on a bridge in his hometown, and inserted into paintings by Caspar David Friedrich and Liu Chunhua. The more recent works in this grouping include a pair of paintings which show the artist alternately watching, and playing, his weekly football match in a park by the nearby Rosedale Hotel, and another which shows different croppings of a cell phone photograph taken during a recent trip to Indonesia.



▲ *Untitled (Penguin)*, 2003, Oil on canvas, 170 x 176 cm, Private collection, Switzerland

◀ *Untitled (Figure Seen From the Back)*, 2009, Oil on canvas, 200 x 200 cm, Private collection, Switzerland

SIDE

“I must abandon the pursuit of the painterly, and make my works conveyors of meaning and concept.”

The largest group of works in the exhibition, the profile views also demonstrate the widest range in terms of style and subject. These works demonstrate Wang Xingwei's ongoing interest in landscape, for example a trio of paintings which appropriate a work from the kitsch painter Thomas Kinkade, render at a slightly offbeat angle a provincial technical college near the artist's hometown, and make a football pitch from a corrugated

board respectively. This interest in landscape also plays out in images based on crime-scene photography (*Untitled (Outing)*), and film stills (*Butter – Pitchy Night* and *Brother-in-Law*). Throughout these works, Wang has experimented not only with technique and composition, but with the very materials of painting itself, working on unexpected supports and sometimes even destroying the physical integrity of the canvas.

▼ *Butter – Pitchy Night*, 2001, Oil on canvas, 200 x 420 cm, Private collection, Beijing



SIDE

“I am a painter without a particular style; what passes for style is often just genre.”

Wang Xingwei's interest in exploring, and politely subverting, art history becomes apparent in some of his side profile paintings. The quadptych *Developmental Step* makes this interest explicit, rendering the (Marxist) progression of human evolution and civilization from left to right, while the dialectic of art history (with canvases referring to Monet, Duchamp, Beuys, and Koons) runs right to left. Ascending is based on the pose of the male figure in Botticelli's *Venus and Mars*, while *Midas* pictures a sad Marcel Duchamp surrounded by his readymades, equating the artist's ability to conjure art from everyday objects to the tragic king's ability to turn things into gold. Western art history has never been Wang's only target—take *Eight Women's Suicide in a River*, which revisits Quan Shanshi's revolutionary masterpiece, this time with the heroines rolling up their trousers to show a little leg.



Reference, repetition, and variation are fundamental components of Wang Xingwei's practice. Female nudes, penguins, pandas, flight attendants, juvenile sailors, and angry nurses are just a few of the uniformed archetypes that have appeared and reappeared throughout Wang's output, particularly since 2005. As the critic Zhang Li has written, "Wang is not interested in what these uniformed figures represent or symbolize, he merely allows the characters he creates to inhabit this outer shell parasitically, playing the parts he composes for them in his drama, the better to generate new stories."

▲ *Untitled (Hostess and Nurse in a Raft)*, 2005, Oil on canvas, 195 x 222 cm, Private collection, Switzerland

◀ *Untitled (Flowerpot)*, 2009, Oil on canvas, 240 x 200 cm, Ringier Collection, Switzerland

SIDE

“I think people understand problems in more or less the same way as animals.”

One of the styles that Wang Xingwei regularly employs is archetypal abstraction. The characters in the “Large Rowboat” and “Selling Eggs” series come from a genre of throwaway illustration familiar to any reader of middlebrow Chinese literary magazines during the 1980s, akin to New Yorker cartoons in the American context. A man (the artist?) woos a woman with a typically bourgeois boat outing, culminating in a trip around a lake in a boat shaped like a public toilet in *Sunday Afternoon in the Youth Park* (a reference to Seurat’s *Sunday Afternoon on La Grande Jatte*). The massive painting *Untitled (Comedy)* renders an iconic sketch by the comedian Zhao Benshan from the 2001 Spring Festival variety show where the comedian convinces a healthy passerby to trade his bicycle for a pair of crutches, a poignant satire of recent commercialism. Many of Wang Xingwei’s paintings turn on visual similarities: disjointed bicycle wheels become globular spheres become basketballs become breasts, and so on in an endless chain of substitution.



▲ *Untitled (Comedy)*, 2010, Oil on canvas, 301 x 398 cm, Collection of Qiao Zhibing

◀ *Untitled (Medium Rowboat)*, 2004, Oil on canvas, 120 x 160 cm
Erlenmeyer Foundation, Switzerland.

FRONT

“I hope that when people will forget to ask me why I painted this or that, or why I painted in this or that way. I want them to experience something of their own.”

More than either of the preceding sections, the frontal views share a common concern in their focus on the genre of portraiture. The old lady, discovered on a brochure advertising a painting cram school near the main gate of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, has become the center of Wang Xingwei's most extended series to date, rendered in unique and non-linear permutations. Initially painted by a model student in response to an art-school entrance examination prompt on “wisdom in old age,” her true origins are less important than the gesture of finding extended inspiration in an image encountered arbitrarily. The pair of works, *Death of Wu Tao* reflect on the 2001 suicide of a fellow artist born in the same year as Wang Xingwei. *Painting Wang Yin*, likewise, renders another of the artist's close friends in that friend's signature style.



▲ *Death of Wu Tao No. 2*, 2012, Oil on canvas, 150 x 150 cm, Private collection, Taipei

◀ *Untitled (Bonsai Old Lady)*, 2012, Oil on canvas, 150 x 180 cm, Private collection, Taipei

FRONT



“I think we should forget traditional art history and use a living kind of thought to define ourselves, finding value in pure self-expression.”

Chinese contemporary art, as a field, is another of Wang Xingwei's many interests. Two of Wang's frontal view paintings in particular, both created nearly twenty years ago, poke fun at the image of art in China that many still hold. In *The East is Red*, critic Li Xianting drives an “East is Red” brand tractor, flanked by stock figures from paintings by artists like Wang Guangyi, Fang Lijun, and Liu Wei who worked in the modes of “Political Pop” and “Cynical Realism,” terms which Li himself coined. *Standard Expression of After 1989*, a reference to Zeng Fanzhi's early “Hospital” series, places a similar range of appropriated characters behind doors. Portraits of specific individuals including Communist-friendly Canadian doctor Norman Bethune, television star Bai Yansong, and the artist's son Wang Huashang mix with stock figures of a Chinese intellectual and an earnest cartoon comrade.



- ▲ *The East is Red*, 1995, Oil on canvas, 180 x 180 cm, Private collection, Switzerland
- ◀ *Untitled (Chinese Brush No. 2)*, 2010, Oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm, Collection of the artist

FRONT

“I consider the artist as a postman. He should not be overly curious about what is inside the envelopes he delivers.”

The image of the artist lying in a field, hands behind his head recurs in Wang's work. In *Untitled (The Stone-Breakers)*, rather than being obscured by a flock of penguins, he provides the space on which Courbet's laborers go to work. The pose of the golfer in *Untitled (Golf Player and Watermelons No. 1)*, uncannily displaced in the center of a field of watermelons, mimics that of a 1960s Shanghai theater star depicted in another of Wang's paintings. *Untitled (Three Nudes)* meanwhile cheekily combines two classics of Chinese academic realism, Yang Feiyun's *Male Nude* and Li Tianpian's *Republic of China Women*.

▼ *Untitled (Golf Player and Watermelons No. 1)*, 2005, Oil on canvas, 137 x 210 cm, Collection of Tian Jun



CATALOGUE

A full-length, bilingual (Chinese-English) exhibition catalogue accompanies the exhibition, featuring a foreword by Philip Tinari and essays by Museum Migros für Gegenwartkunst curator Rafael Gygax, leading Chinese independent curator Zhang Li, and critic Nataline Colonello. Containing extended commentary and reproductions of nearly 100 of Wang's works, it is by far the most comprehensive publication on the artist to date. Wang Xingwei is published by UCCA in collaboration with the Beijing editorial studio Hinabook and the World Book Publishing House. It is designed by the design studio Hinterland, New York, and available from the UCCA bookstore (UCCASTORE @ ART.BOOK).



UCCA LIMITED EDITIONS



▲ Wang Xingwei, *Old Lady With Cat*, Copperplate etching, 66.5X69.5cm

UCCA Limited Editions and Wang Xingwei have collaborated to make a Limited Edition series print featuring the latest image in Wang's "Old Lady" series, which will be available from UCCASTORE to coincide with the exhibition. In this new image, a copperplate print published in an edition of fifteen, the old lady holds a pair of cats in her arms. The limited edition debuted at Art Basel in Hong Kong the week following the exhibition opening.

Hours

Tuesday — Sunday, 10:00-19:00

Last entry 18:30

Closed on Monday

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