

1-1-2003

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Curtis L. Carter

Marquette University, [curtis.carter@marquette.edu](mailto:curtis.carter@marquette.edu)

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Published version. “The Sound of Urgent Bells and Drums' Gao Xingjian Ink Paintings" in *Gao Xingjian: Ink Paintings 1983-1993*. Milwaukee, WI: Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University, 2003: 9-12. [Publisher link](#). © 2003 Marquette University. Used with permission.

# “The Sound of Urgent Bells and Drums”

## Gao Xingjian Ink Paintings

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Gao Xingjian is a Chinese-born dissident painter, playwright, and novelist now working in Paris. He was born in 1940 in the midst of a national crisis precipitated by the Japanese military occupation of China. He was introduced to Western culture through the influence of his mother, an actress educated by Western missionaries, while his father provided him with an understanding of traditional Chinese culture. Gao's development as an artist began after the post-World War II struggle between the Nationalist and Communist forces. Along with other artists and intellectuals in China between 1966 and 1976, Gao was sent to the country for re-education through forced manual labor during the Cultural Revolution. Yet he insists that art is grounded in aesthetics rather than politics and is neither a tool of protest, nor an instrument of propaganda.<sup>1</sup> In the tradition of Chinese arts, Gao devotes equal effort to painting and writing. As he rose to prominence, his paintings and writings were confiscated, or banned in China. After a series of visits to Europe beginning in 1979, he moved permanently to Paris in 1987 and became a French citizen in 1997.

The works selected for the Haggerty exhibition were acquired from the artist for the collection of the Morat-Institute for Art and Art History, Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany between 1983 and 1993, and represent the finest of Gao's paintings.

Like Mondrian, Malevich, and Kandinsky in the West, Gao has written substantively on art. He shares with these writers a sense of the limitless possibilities open to art when its practices are guided by intuition rather than a particular theoretical aim. Still he asks the question, whether the possibilities for meaningful realizations in painting are exhausted by the efforts of Picasso, Kandinsky, and other modernist innovators in Twentieth-century painting. In answering this question Gao eschews philosophical questions concerning, “What does painting seek to express, and what is painting?” and turns directly to painting. He chooses to paint with traditional means consisting of free expression on a two dimensional surface of rice paper and India ink. Yet his work is not bound by traditional codes and conventions. Gao's palette extends over 30 grey, black, and white tonalities which he applies experimentally across the painting surface.

Although Gao's pictures are rooted in the aesthetic tradition of Chinese brush painting, they display a modern edge by incorporating a spirit of endless innovation gleaned from Western painting. The modern edge in Gao's paintings is achieved in part by enriching the ink surfaces with subtle variations of light, texture, and ink saturation and by applying the techniques of modern photography (angle, depth of field, and focus) to achieve greater pictorial depth. Gao's perspective is called “diffuse point perspective,” or “false perspective” and is based on Chinese practices, rather than the linear geometric perspective of Brunelleschi and Alberti in the paintings of the Italian Renaissance.<sup>2</sup> Pictorial space in Gao's paintings, which contain both abstract and representational elements, is based



Vincent Van Gogh, *Olive Trees in Landscape with Mount Gaussier and the Rock with Two Holes*, 1889  
Pencil, pen, reed pen and ink, 147 x 62.5 cm (18 1/2 x 24 1/2 in.)  
Nationalgalerie, Berlin.



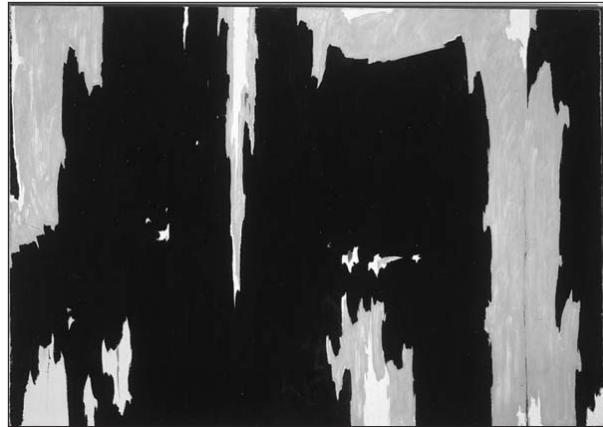
Wassily Kandinsky, *Impression III (Concert)*, 1911  
Oil on canvas, 76.8 x 100 cm (30 1/4 x 39 3/8 in.)  
Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, München.

on inner feelings rather than observations of the external world. According to Gao, “Inner visions have no depth of field; they cannot be taken apart by geometry or arranged according to topology...”<sup>3</sup> He likens the experience of space in his pictures to a dream-like journey into the interior of the picture “which shapes an inner vision and evokes emotion, energy and vitality.”<sup>4</sup> A single lost figure wanders through the sparsely marked foreground space in Gao’s *Towards the Unknown* (1993) into threatening dark patches of the picture, suggesting what a corresponding inner journey might be like. The experience demands attention and imagination from the painter as well as from the viewer.

Gao compares painting to writing, “where even today in using the language of our forebearers, we can still speak our own minds and come up with fresh things to say.”<sup>5</sup> For him, “Painting begins where language fails.”<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the paintings afford endless possibilities for new discoveries. This link between painting and writing accentuates the dual aspects of his own career as painter and writer, where he has achieved major stature as an artist in each medium. Like his paintings, Gao’s plays such as *Weekend Quartet* (1995) are comprised of “interior landscapes of the soul” rather than of external actions.<sup>7</sup> *Weekend Quartet* examines the characters in the play with respect to their self-examination found in monologues reflecting dream sequences, hallucinations, and memory flashes aimed at disclosing the characters’ dark inner secrets as well as their less profound responses to the stream of trivial events in daily life. Yet painting is not a theatrical act. “You never perform when you paint.”<sup>8</sup> In his plays, as in his paintings, Gao strives for a new language. His plays do not follow the rules of conventional drama. In contrast to Stanislavskian realism, they employ disjointed temporal sequences, flashbacks, and the inter-mixing of subjective and objective voices. Characters are often divided into a plurality of voices or persons allowing for the same character to be enriched with many perspectives. His play, *The Other Shore* (1986) is made up of disjointed narrative units instead of a coherent plot. His aim is to portray life in a “pure dramatic form” that will evoke an experience of awakening or revelation. “The idea is to allow the mind of the audience to ‘wander in contemplation’ among the words so as to grasp their true spirit...”<sup>9</sup>

Unlike contemporary Chinese artists such as Xu Bing (born 1955) who embraced conceptual art, or Feng Meng Bo (born 1966) who developed CD ROM video games as art, Gao has chosen to reshape traditional ink paintings to serve his own contemporary purposes. For example, the delicately layered tones from white to grey to black in his *River At Night* (1986) cat. p. 8 are woven into a dream-like inner landscape extending the limits of traditional ink drawings to new levels. In contrast to this work, Xu Bing’s monumental conceptual *Book From the Sky* (1988) consisting of scrolls, books, and panels of invented Chinese language characters depends upon conceptual factors as much as on aesthetics.<sup>10</sup> Feng Meng Bo’s CD ROM video installation, *Taking Mount Doom By Strategy* (1998) is an interactive video game, which mixes traditional staging of the Beijing opera with video games to explore the meaning of the Cultural Revolution in China.<sup>11</sup> All three artists’ work is widely admired in the West. Yet despite its incorporation of tradition, their innovative work was viewed with suspicion by the cultural agencies responsible for monitoring developments in contemporary art in China.

Of the Western artists who come to mind upon looking at Gao's paintings, certain works of Vincent Van Gogh, Wassily Kandinsky, and Clyfford Still bear interesting resemblances. All of these artists ground their art in aesthetic considerations rather than didactic moral or social aims. The common visual elements found in their works are especially notable when comparing black and white photographs of the artists' respective works. Van Gogh's drawings *Wild Vegetation in the Hills*, (1889), *Olive Trees in Landscape with Mount Gaussier and the Rock with Two Holes* (1889) cat. p. 9, and his painting, *View From Montmartre* (1887), a landscape with wheat fields, all share with Gao's ink paintings rich and compelling visual structures that immediately draw the viewer's eye into the picture space.<sup>12</sup> Both Kandinsky's early works and Gao's paintings employ elements of romanticism. They emerge from inner reflection rather than observation and exhibit forms that lend themselves to inner spiritual contemplation. Neither artist allows for a sharp differentiation of form and content, or of abstraction and figuration. See Kandinsky, *Impressions III (Concert)* (1911) cat. p. 10 and *Picture With a Circle* (1911).<sup>13</sup> In their use of white, grey and black tones to form the picture space, Still's paintings created in the mid 1940s bear close visual similarities to Gao's ink paintings between 1983 and 1993. This is particularly notable in the paintings *September 1946* and *1957-D No. 1*.<sup>14</sup> These apparent similarities do not suggest direct influence of the three Western artists on Gao's paintings. However, they do affirm his mixing of Chinese and Western approaches to painting.



Clyfford Still, *1957-D No. 1*, 1957  
Oil on canvas, 287 x 403.9 cm (9 ft 5 in. x 13 ft 3 in.)  
Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY.  
Gift of Seymour H. Knox, Jr., 1959.

Gao's art practices are based in part on Zen philosophy.<sup>15</sup> In keeping with Zen philosophy, Gao looks inward for inspiration and away from oppression, conventionality, consumption, fashion, and other "worldly" cultural practices that might diminish the inner human spirit. He is concerned with understanding the self, but not in a Nietzschean sense. Ink marks on the paper carry feeling and implication and display free expression as in traditional Chinese painting. However, he regards expression as self-purification grounded in aesthetics rather than "I" centered self-expression.

1. Gao Xingjian, *Return to Painting*, translated from the French by Nadia Benabid, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2002), p. 13. Previously published in French, translated from the Chinese by Noël and Liliane Dutrait, (Paris: Flammarion, 2001).
2. Gao, *Return to Painting*, pp. 47, 48.
3. Gao, *Return to Painting*, p. 42.
4. Cristina Carrillo de Albornoz, "Chinese Abstraction in Paris," *The Art Newspaper*, no. 125 (May, 2002), 26.
5. Gao, Xingjian, "Thoughts on Painting," *Gao Xingjian: Tuschmalerei 1983-1993* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Morat Institut für Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft, 2000), p. 95.
6. Gao, *Return to Painting*, p. 39.
7. "Introduction," *The Other Shore: Plays by Gao Xingjian*, translated by Gilbert C. F. Fong (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press of Hong Kong, 1999), p. xxxix.
8. Gao, *Return to Painting*, p. 40.
9. *The Other Shore: Plays by Gao Xingjian*, p. xxv.
10. *Words Without Meaning, Meaning Without Words: The Art of Xu Bing*, exh. cat., (Washington, D.C.: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and Seattle/London: University of Washington Press, 2001), p. 47.
11. Curtis L. Carter, *Feng Meng Bo Video Games*, exh. cat., (Milwaukee: Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University, November 20, 1998-January 31, 1999).
12. J.B. de la Faille, *The Works of Vincent Van Gogh*, F1542, F1544, (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff International, 1970), p. 533.
13. John Golding, *Paths to the Absolute* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, Bollingen Series 48 XXXV, 2000), pp. 99, 102.
14. Golding, *Paths to the Absolute*, pp. 186, 217.
15. Gao, *Return to Painting*, pp. 29, 30.





*Urwald (Jungle)*, 1988

Ink on paper

103 x 105.9 cm (40 1/2 x 41 3/4 in.)

Collection of the Morat—Institut für Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft, Freiburg im Breisgau