



ART RADAR ASIA

Gao Minglu's maximalist exhibition blurs boundaries between traditional and contemporary Chinese art

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CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART CHINESE AVANT-GARDE

Contrasts Gallery Shanghai was the host of the recent exhibition “Mind Space: Maximalism in Contrasts” curated by distinguished art scholar and curator Gao Minglu. While visually the works in the exhibition referenced Western modern or conceptual art, the philosophical underpinnings were quite different. Artists Zhu Jinshi, Zhang Yu, Lei Hong and He Xiangyu participated in the show.

All works in the exhibition were chosen because they fall under the term “[maximalism](#)”, a term used by Gao Minglu when discussing the philosophical core of Chinese abstract art. Gao characterises the art in “Mind Space: Maximalism in Contrasts” as being “incomplete and fragmented records of daily meditation.” According to him, they are like a diary or running account showing the daily workings and activities of the artist, be they trivial or not, rather than a complete work of art. In this way, they present some similarities with Western [postmodernist deconstruction](#).



Zhu Jinshi, Hui Neng's Work, 2010, ink on rice paper, 2000 x 72 x 130 cm.

Generally, the work of artists in the maximalism tradition is less popular or has largely been ignored. According to Gao, this is partly because of its lack of political subject matter and partly because of its *literati* aesthetics. *Literati* painters were Chinese scholar-officials who were not concerned with technical skill and commonly created black ink paintings. The style of the brushstroke was said to reveal something about the inner life of the artist.

“Although it [Maximalism] has never achieved mainstream popularity (in comparison with Political Pop and Cynical Realism), for decades some Chinese artists have devoted themselves to this low-key avant-garde practice.” *Gao Minglu, taken from his essay ‘Mind Space: Maximalism in Contrasts’*

How can we come to understand works created in the maximalist tradition? The curator states in his essay, *Does Abstract Art Exist in China?*, “to decode these works, the audience must do more than read the physical form of a work (that is, its surface, or text). It must understand the entire process of making the art, the context underlying the work.”

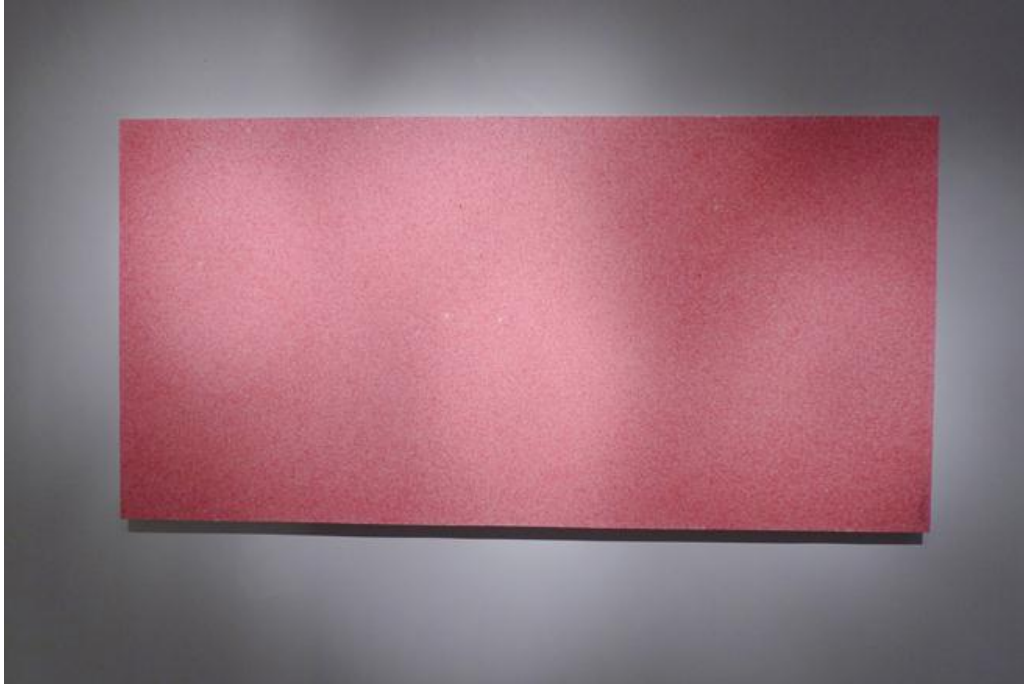
The four artists: Zhu Jinshi, Zhang Yu, Lei Hong and He Xiangyu

[Zhu Jinshi](#) (b. Beijing, 1954) is one of China’s leading avant-garde artists and was a member of the now legendary [Stars Group](#), an artist collective active between 1979 and 1983. Zhu has dedicated the bulk of his career both in China and Germany to the exploration of abstract art and installation work. His medium of choice is Chinese rice paper and ink which he also uses in the exhibited installation, *Soaking*. Here he fills a metal container with ink and places a pile of rice paper partly immersed in this ink. The half of the paper that is outside the ink gradually changes colour without intervention from human hands. It is a work in progress and uses rice paper and ink; these *literati* characteristics put the work squarely within the maximalist tradition.



Zhu Jinshi, *Soaking*, 2008, 170 x 100 x 50 cm.

Like Zhu Jinshi, [Zhang Yu](#) (b. Tianjin, 1959) has also chosen rice paper and ink for his installation. For the past twenty years he has been using his finger prints; he dips his fingers into paint or water and randomly places them onto ink painting scrolls. He uses this “language” to express the relationship between our bodies and life. According to curator Gao, “[b]y being transformed from individual identification into repetitious ‘abstract’ marks, the fingerprints lose any expressional and symbolic meaning but regain a universal beauty and infinity through the process.”



Zhang Yu, Fingerprint 2004.10-1, ink on rice paper, 200 × 260 cm.

For *The Coca-Cola Project*, young artist [He Xiangyu](#) (b. Dan Dong, 1986) cooked tens of thousands of litres of Coke which crystalized the dark liquid. He then made ink out of the created substance and used this “ink” to create his paintings and for writing calligraphy.



He Xiangyu, Skeleton no. 1, 2009 125 x 80 cm

[Lei Hong's](#) (b. Sichuan Province, 1972) work has the characteristic marks of Western abstract art – with its myriads of dots, lines and squares – but conceptually his motives are quite different. According to the artist, these marks are not born out of artistic concepts but rather out of imagery, akin to traditional Chinese ink painting.



The curator of the exhibition, Gao Minglu.

Gao Minglu and Contrasts Gallery

[Gao Minglu](#), is an author, critic, curator, and scholar of contemporary Chinese art. He currently serves as Head of the Fine Arts Department at the [Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts](#) and is a Research Professor in the Department of History of Art and Architecture at the [University of Pittsburgh](#). He has curated many exhibitions in the U.S. and China including the “China/Avant-Garde” exhibition (1989), “Inside Out: New Chinese Art”(1998), “The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art” (2005), “Apartment Art in China, 1970s-1990s” and “Yi School: Thirty Years of Chinese Abstraction” (2008). An [art research center](#) in Beijing is named after him, the mandate of which is to work as an alternative research space into contemporary art in China that is neither involved with the government nor with commercial art galleries.

[Contrasts Gallery](#) is a Shanghai based gallery which was founded by [Pearl Lam](#) in Hong Kong in 1992. The focus of the gallery is to promote cultural dialogue and exchange between the East and West, not only in art but also in design and architecture.