

LETTER

Wang Yiming: Edges of the inaccessible

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1. Genius loci

Wang Yiming's creative process is the fruit of a slow maturation coupled with a personal and intimate journey that has led him to the edges of the world. According to him, it all began in July 1987, when the young artist decided to devote all his savings to a long trip to Tibet for 2 months. For him, it was a real dream that stemmed from his childhood and the stories of his father who himself had visited Lhasa at the end of the 1950s. From this confrontation with the deserted landscapes and the highest mountains, 40 watercolor paintings were born, still figurative, and the paintings are sort of a logbook, in which the painter's future style can already be read. The strokes are lively, lyrical, and energetic, since what matters above all in Wang Yiming's eyes is to transcribe an emotion drawn from the landscape. However, it had been more than 20 years before he returned to Tibet in 2011 – the beginning of an extremely fertile period, culminating in the publication of a first series of paintings, *the Rainy Season at Shangri-La*. These large-scale paintings were done directly *sur le motif* and in extreme conditions, at an altitude of over 4000 m. Its title is explained firstly by the impressionist sensitivity of the artist, who is fascinated by the climate of the high plateaus bathed in an incessantly changing light. Second, the Shangri-La is a utopian place, an ideal lamasery described at length by James Hilton in his novel *Lost Horizons*. Everyone can enjoy total freedom and absolute happiness in this place, at the price of a single sacrifice – that of civilization. It is undoubtedly at this precise moment that the long walks of the artist, in the heart of the arid solitudes, really amplify their meaning: they mark the beginning of a spiritual adventure where each step, far from the human societies, makes it possible to find a lost link with the world, and with ourselves. Inevitably, we think of the attraction of the painters and the romantic writers of the high mountains, and in particular of the pages of *La Nouvelle Heloise* which are devoted to them:

“It seems that as we rise above the abode of man, we leave behind all banal and earthly feelings, and that as we approach the ethereal regions, the soul contracts something of their unalterable purity. We are serious without melancholy, peaceful without indolence, content to be and to think: all too lively desires are blunted... We forget everything, we forget ourselves, we no longer know where we are”^[1].

This famous quote by Jean-Jacques Rousseau seems to perfectly illuminate the approach of Wang Yiming, who soon joined, as if magnetized, the foothills of the Himalayas. In 2015, he began painting a new series of canvases, *The Mountain Kora*, from the base camp facing Mount Everest. As he got closer to the peaks, his works became less and less figurative. Not only because the landscape, which was always shrouded in a sea of clouds, was withdrawn from his view but also because Tibet, in his own words, has ended up melting into an intimate, mental image. The black, strong strokes of the first period give way, little by little, to shimmering patches of color; the abstract colors of a land where the cobalt blue of the sky and the lakes contrast with the ochre of the deserts, the red of the walls, the yellow of the sun and the gray of the clouds. This creative process, from

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Citation: Jouanneau-Damance G,
2023, Wang Yiming: Edges of the
inaccessible.
Arts & Communication, 1(1): 358.
<https://doi.org/10.36922/ac.358>

Received: February 6, 2023

Accepted: February 9, 2023

Published Online: March 6, 2023

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mimesis to abstraction, accompanying a quest for purity and transcendence then continues at the end of the 2010s, which mark the beginning of the “large installations.” In 2017, helped by a team of volunteers, Wang Yiming made *in situ* 83 *Flags*, or *lougta*, measuring fifteen meters by 3 m. On these gigantic jute canvases, the artist let himself go into automatic gestures, close to the *action painting* of a Pollock or informal practices. Each of these works in this respect becomes not an image, but a simple receptacle of an emotion, of a sensitive *experience*, born of the encounter with what is called in Latin the *genius loci*, which means the spirit of the place or the energy of the landscape. Moreover, they are also thought of as offerings, made to this sublime territory, inspiring both terror and ecstasy. The *Flags* were then arranged in the manner of primitive structures, such as the *Giant of Wilmington* or the spirals of the Nazca Desert, to create symbolic forms that can be seen from the sky. This was the time when the artist had just named his painting *Waiting for the Wind*, and installations such as *Eye*, *Rainbow*, or *Glorious Past* seem to complete an itinerary that goes from the near to the far, and from paintings to what the Anglo-Saxon critics call “earthwork.”

2. Poetics of the uprooting

It is indeed quite difficult to categorize Wang Yiming’s creations, which are at the same time a “happening” installation and an abstract art. The generic category, which seems to illuminate the different facets of his work in the most convincing way, remains that of *Land Art*. As it was defined in the West in the early 1970s, *Land Art* was immediately placed under the sign of rupture and transgression. “Isolation” affirms the artist Walter de Maria in 1983 and “constitutes its only and unique essence,” seeking to consume the rupture of a certain fringe of artists with the excesses of the globalization by this formula, while celebrating the birth of a new ecological conscience. It is striking to note that this idea applies with great ease to the work of Wang Yiming, based on what is called “the poetics of uprooting.” It is an uprooting from the civilized, from the comfort of modern life, to move toward otherness and toward the primitive savagery of the mountains. It is an uprooting from the framing space of the museum, from the norms of the art world, preferring a virgin place, delimited only by the rocky earth, the water of the lakes, and the clouds of altitude. Finally, it is an uprooting from all the pictorial traditions of landscape representation. Contrary to the Western ways, the artist refuses to “face” the landscape, to submit it to the only perceptive conscience, and to make it a simple “window opened on the world”^[2]. In contrast to the Eastern ways, the painter does not reduce himself to being only a vector, and to do *as* the landscape *does*. Thus, Wang Yiming replaces the black ink of traditional

Chinese painting with color; the verticality of prints with the horizontality of canvases on the ground; the precision of immemorial gestures with instinctive gestures; and the intellectual symbolism of the “modulation of lines” with the naturalness of ephemeral and changing installations, sculpted by the light, the relief, and the wind.

However, Wang Yiming’s work cannot be limited to a single modernist posture. By choosing to lose himself in the heart of arid immensities, the artist seems to seek, above all, to *return*. The wandering and the adventure are intimately linked, indeed, to a certain availability of being; as soon as the constraints of the daily life do not apply anymore, they become propitious to the reverie, to intimate meditations allowing to reveal a true self. When they are associated with the sublime character of a landscape, making us aware of human fragility, they reveal in us archaic sensations and emotions, in which culture does not cease to bury and erase. As Philippe Jaccottet notes, in his book *La Promenade sous les arbres*:

“It is likely that great emotions make us sense our links with the outside world, suggest a hidden unity, and make us find very old images that seem to be deposited at a certain depth of human memory. Perhaps, these kinds of revelations are granted to us because we are detached from ourselves and more open to the lessons of the outside world”^[3].

In agreement with Jaccottet, Wang Yiming’s poetics, which led him to paint *in* and *with* the landscape, to pay attention to the natural realm of silent things, are concomitant with the rediscovery of a primordial base. It is easy to observe such a will at work in the painter’s technique. We have already mentioned the simplicity of instinctive gestures; the process of purification leading to the turning away of images; the place left to chance, to the unconscious, to seize, as close as possible; and the spouting of an elemental sensitivity. It should also be noted that the sensual aspect, almost carnal, of the sketches, are realized in the margin of the installations. The bright, luminous colors, like so many gems, are explained by the saturation of almost pure pigments, very dense, and pasty, clinging to the striations of the smoothed papers. All this gives the works a mineral aspect, both refined and raw, similar to the reflections of light on the stony soils of Tibet. In addition to this plastic attraction for the substance, the quest for the origin is finally read, in the very form of the *Flags*, which are a sign toward an extremely distant spiritual experience. For the record, the *thangka* of Buddhism consists of vast scrolls that are unrolled on walls or rock faces, while the *lougta*, “horses of breath” hung in the most inaccessible places, are small pennants that are caressed by the wind, which should bring supplications to the gods. Wang Yiming intertwines

these two dimensions in his works, in which he situates in a time long before modern painting – a time when art served mainly as a medium for the expression of a belief or faith. It is therefore hardly surprising to see the artist refers in his titles to the *kora* – the founding pilgrimage of the Bön tradition, which consisted of walking around a mountain deity to purify one's soul during the ascent. In his eyes, the *kora* are “endless *hada*,” and these brightly colored silk scarves are offered to deities as a sign of adoration. The artist's installations are therefore colored with a 1000-year-old ritual meaning; each of his journeys and his itineraries in the heart of the highlands are materialized *in situ* by richly decorated canvases placed on the ground, which mark the stages not only of a liberation of the self, but also of a rediscovered union of man with the sacred. Returned to their original simplicity of offerings, his paintings would aim, in a word and as in the early days of Buddhism, to depollute the earth, to appease the gods, and to restore, finally, a balance broken by the activities of man.

3. Esthetics of the numinous

Wang Yiming's work is thus divided, punctuated by two contradictory impulses: uprooting on the one hand, and rooting on the other, without either of them ever being fully satisfied. If the intertext of the Buddhist traditions is well present, as shown earlier, it is never anything but a distant reminiscence, and the *Flags* with the colored spots, contrary to the *lougta*, do not address any clear message, neither to man, nor to the gods. These formal references are explained, above all, by the ideal they serve – that of a relationship to the world where art would be in perfect adequacy with the landscape. Thus, well beyond the borders of Tibet, Wang Yiming's work has a universal vocation. What is important to him is to bear witness to a lived experience, through which man becomes once again sensitive to the nature that surrounds him. It is then less a question of religion or, strictly speaking, of tradition and origin than of the powerful and ineffable feeling of a link uniting all things, and that in philosophy one names the numinous. For this reason, all the expressive forces of the works of the artist seems to reside in what Romain Roland names “the oceanic” and Amiel calls “*samādhi*”:

“In these moments, it seems that my consciousness withdraws into its eternity... In these sublime moments, the body has disappeared, the mind has simplified, unified; passions, sufferings, wills, and ideas have resorbed in the being, like raindrops in the ocean that generates them. This state is contemplation and not stupor... It is the sensation of spiritual infinity. It is the bottom of freedom”^[4].

In view of his testimonies, Wang Yiming seems to have been seized by ecstasies of an intensity comparable to

Amiel's experience. He claims to paint in a sort of trance, outside himself, perfectly unbound, and insensitive to the physical pain that his monumental undertakings cause. It is undeniable that these flashes of *wild mysticism* led him to return so often to Tibet. As James Hilton mentions, the spiritual and magnetic atmosphere of Shangri-La is not found in any other places, and it is impossible to stay away from the reflection of the moon on “the blue mountain” for long.

For all that, this is, in my opinion, the main lesson that Wang Yiming gives us through his practice is that it is extremely difficult to reach, and above all, to maintain this state of elation, where the individual feels in all the fibers of his body an impression of “co-ownership” of reciprocal interweaving of the self and the world. The exercise of the stripping requires us to renounce all our human clothes to abstract ourselves, literally, from the world of images, and representations. However, the human seems so limited, conditioned by what Hans Arp names the “vitreous partition” of the metaphysics that he can get rid of the appearances only by placing himself in the most extreme and the most untenable situations. That is why Wang Yiming felt the necessity of having to stand at what could be called the “edges of the inaccessible.” They are geographical limits, far from any habitable land, but also physiological limits, by painting in an unbreathable atmosphere, where the lack of oxygen at the slightest movement is felt. These practices are not new: they were tested, more than fifteen centuries ago, by the “Fathers of the Desert”^[5] of the Eastern tradition. In their eyes, spiritual elevation could only be acquired by means of an exile on the edge of the civilized world; of long immobile stations under a blazing sun, under a driving rain; and of meditations facing the changing seasons. Unfortunately, it is only at this price that Wang Yiming seems to admit that it is possible to find the grace of a vision, making the desert a place of light and life, where each stone, each peak shelters a divinity.

Reaching us from afar, his works remind us that such a modality of existence still persists and is buried in the depths of our consciousness. They teach us that in spite of the *moiré fables*, in which we rock ourselves, we remain and will remain to take again a beautiful formula of Francis Ponge – “a certain vibration of the nature” which “is called the man”^[6].

Acknowledgments

None.

Conflict of interests

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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