



Yang Mian

NEW PAINTINGS

M. Sutherland Fine Arts
NEW YORK, NY

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This catalogue accompanies the exhibition

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“Yang Mian Exposes an Essential Truth for Our Era” © 2016 Yang Mian
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Introduction

Martha Sutherland

The paintings of Sichuan-based artist Yang Mian (b. 1970) challenge the new world order of media and digitization as well as basic notions of Chinese painting tradition. Yang's latest series, *CMYK*, now showing at M. Sutherland Fine Arts, questions the fundamental premise of visual perception. In this age of digital imagery, can one experience a reproduction of a great artwork in the same way as the original without any surrounding context? Further, can the Chinese literati painting ideals of reinterpreting and transcending the past be attained using material and techniques of our contemporary technological age?

The latest series of works now on exhibit at M. Sutherland Fine Arts are based on Chinese paintings masterpieces dating from the Tang through the Qing Dynasty. Yang pushes the notion of the subtle, imperceptible changes of digital photography and the Internet that separate the image from the original in ways that the viewer cannot discern. Using computer and painstaking manual techniques, Yang further distills the elements of the original image into a completely new artistic vocabulary. No matter the size, medium or condition of the originals, Yang Mian expertly equalizes the various media into acrylic on canvas. Instead of wall fresco, or ink and mineral pigments on paper or silk, Yang creates a parallel universe by hand and machine, thoroughly modern but distantly based on the older, familiar images.

Yang Mian was in the first class of students to return to the Sichuan Art Academy after the Cultural Revolution. Though trained in the “Beaux Arts” methodology, he quickly developed his own theoretical approaches to painting. From 1996 through 2007, Yang's oil paintings questioned the changing standards of beauty in modern Chinese society, making pictures inspired by advertising and the cosmetics industry. M. Sutherland Fine Arts exhibited Yang Mian's works in two shows at the gallery's former space on East 80th Street.

The *CMYK* series began in 2000 when Yang Mian made an accidental discovery while preparing a lecture to a painting class at his alma mater. The only available image of Picasso's *Girl before a Mirror* (1932), had substandard resolution, so when it was projected on the screen, the CMYK dots - (cyan, magenta, yellow and key black), “created a chaotic mess of magnified color pixels.” Yang was intrigued and started to think about how this effect could be used in his own paintings.

After several years of trial and error, Yang Mian developed a unique creative process, using technical and manual manipulation to produce his *CMYK* paintings. In multiple steps on the computer, Yang separates out each of the color pixels and edits the image so that no color dots overlap as in regular digital reproductions, making hundreds of thousands of dot placement decisions per painting. He starts with the black dots, then adds blue/cyan, then red, with yellow last. Finally, he cuts out stencils using a special computer printer for each color and then laboriously paints the canvas layer by layer. At times, Yang breaks down the shades of blue into three different tonalities so that there are three separate cyan stencils instead of one. The result is Yang's personal interpretation: a unique image, seemingly so simple and mass produced but in reality a culmination of a multiple-week artistic endeavor singular in its complexity. In Yang Mian's mind, his *CMYK* work is not a rejection of history but a reaction to and extension of Chinese literati tradition.

Yang Mian has exhibited in numerous academic solo and group shows throughout China, Asia and Europe, including several international Biennale exhibitions. Yang's works are part of numerous renowned private and museum collections throughout the world, from the Sigg Collection in Switzerland to the DeYoung Museum of San Francisco. We are privileged to exhibit Yang Mian's most recent *CMYK* paintings in New York.



Yang Mian Exposes an Essential Truth for Our Era

Britta Erickson

“The danger is not that machines are advancing. The danger is that we are losing our intelligence if we rely on computers instead of our own minds. On a fundamental level, we have to ask ourselves: Do we need human intelligence? And what happens if we fail to exercise it?” – George Dyson, science historian¹

These are crucial questions for our time, and they apply not only to information gleaned via computers. We need to remain alert, questioning the reliability of all information sources. We are bombarded by information. It is a defining characteristic of the twenty-first century. Rarely are we beyond reach of advertising billboards, magazines, newspapers, radio, and television. But it is the Internet that has become most ubiquitous. Anyone moderately tech-savvy is at a loss when the Internet is unavailable. We rely on it for news, from international events to “junk” stories about popular media icons to timely updates on our friends’ lives. When conducting research, the first stop is no longer a primary source or a library: it is the Internet, which may be last step as well as the first. While in theory many understand that such easily gained information may be false, its very accessibility, combined with its ubiquity, allows it to infiltrate the subconscious. The media are seductive. And if this is true of text, it is much more the case with images. This effect has been studied and is called the “pictorial superiority effect”: information associated with a visual image has a recall rate many times higher than that of verbal information. Photographs can be particularly seductive: it takes a special effort to question their validity.

Yang Mian has set himself the task of questioning the reliability of the image and, consequently, the power of the media. In addition to being an artist he is a profound thinker: before embarking on a new series of works he chooses his target carefully and reasons through his approach. When both target and approach are resolved to his satisfaction, he proceeds. Then, when he has worked his way through to a logical ending point, the series is complete.

CMYK - Five Dynasties, Xu Xi, Auspicious Magnolia Painting (DETAIL)

A break in his oeuvre may follow, as he contemplates the next target. For the decade from 1997 to 2006 Yang Mian produced the *Standard* series, examining the standards of beauty promulgated by the media, and most particularly the unattainable standards of female beauty spread through advertising. He noted changes in trends from year to year, and expressed them through pastel tinted paintings of current beauties rendered in a blurry fashion completely counter to his artistic training in realism, finished with a slash of vivid color. Following a hiatus from 2009 to early 2010, during which he formulated his approach to a fresh and urgent issue, he embarked on the present series, *CMYK*.

CMYK confronts a subtler problem than that addressed through *Standard*, and the method of confrontation is also subtle. Yang Mian exposes the fact that our understanding of the past is invariably distorted by the means of transmission. As a concrete example and metaphor for this, he has painted a series of reproductions of reproductions of famous artistic masterworks. The hallmark of this series is that his reproductions display a dramatically revealed *CMYK* (cyan, magenta, yellow, and key black) color breakdown, so that the color dots used in printing, and in digital images on the Internet or elsewhere, are enlarged to dominate the composition. While this may sound simple, the paintings are the result of an arduous period of experimentation, leading to a complicated production process. Yang Mian considers it crucial that his easy facility with the medium of oil or acrylic on canvas be hidden: he has no desire to flaunt his talent. Yet it is also important that he create works of art that are technically impossible to duplicate—the method must belong to him alone. Ironically, the veiling of extreme artistic facility and originality was also important to China's literati painters, whose works constitute the subject of a portion of the *CMYK* series.

A basic step in producing the *CMYK* series is the selection of images. Before he embarked on the *CMYK* series, few Chinese artists working in non-traditional

modes had turned to Chinese art history—particularly landscape painting—for inspiration or fresh subject material. The paintings Yang Mian has copied for *CMYK* cover over a millennium, ranging from a probable copy of an eighth century work (*Li Zhaodao Minghuang's Journey to Shu*) to a landscape by Zhu Da (1626-1705; *CMYK Qing Dynasty Zhu Da Landscape*), and even later in the case of European masterpieces. Having decided to include a particular historical painting as a subject in the series, he selects a digital image to download from the Internet. A Google search for images of Fan Kuan's *Travelers among Mountains and Streams*, for example, brings over eleven thousand results, many of which have nothing to do with the query. From them Yang Mian chooses an image of the painting that is not of the highest resolution, but also far from the worst. Nevertheless, the original Fan Kuan is two meters tall and the digital image is a tiny fraction of that: even the highest quality image widely available on the Internet can capture only a tiny portion of the visual information embodied in the original.

After selecting a subject, the next problem is how to translate that subject for transfer onto the canvas. This step in the process required the most of Yang Mian: this is where the talent lies hidden. The technique he developed requires a unique concentration. Manipulating the chosen image via Adobe Illustrator, Yang begins by determining the location of the black dots. While the program can help isolate the black dots, the other three colors must be located visually. There is no easy formula for placing the dots: the artist must add them one by one. His goal is for each dot to have an individual presence—that is, for them to avoid touching one another. Thus, rather than following the exact *CMYK* formation of the original digital image, he decides subjectively where each dot should be placed. In this, his technique approaches that of the Impressionists. This also is where the great challenge lies. To make individual judgments about the placing of up to several hundred thousand dots in a single painting is not easy.



Yang Mian plots the black dots, then the blue or cyan, followed by red and finally yellow. The next step in the process is to blow up each segment of the digital file to check that the dots all are separated from one another, making minor adjustments as necessary. With the final digital model complete, the laborious physical process of transferring it to canvas begins.

A popular technology for advertising signage serves to create stencils, one for each color. The digital file for a single color is sent to the special printer, which punches the dots out of a sheet with a sticky backing. One by one, the four stencils must be adhered to the canvas and the colors applied through the uniformly sized round holes of the stencils. While the industrial printer solved a major technical dilemma, it also created a problem. Yang had to try many different kinds of canvas before he found one that could stand up to the trauma of having four sticky sheets applied and then removed, and that also would not subtly alter the colors. In addition, he experimented with oil paints and water colors before concluding that acrylic served the process best.

At first glance the *CMYK* series paintings appear to have been produced by a highly rational, scientific process. But not only is the precise placement of the dots subjective; the exact colors do not adhere to standard CMYK tones. Ironically, Yang works with a faulty palette. As the blue has a tendency to recede, he has manipulated it so as to alter the tone or emphasis of an image, resulting in three separate blues in the series.

The original flash of insight that led to the *CMYK* series came to Yang Mian while he was teaching a painting class in 2000. He wished to discuss Picasso's *Girl before a Mirror*, and needed to make a slide. The image available was quite small, such that when he projected the slide he made from it, the CMYK dots were readily apparent. According to Yang, "When I put it into the projector, I was amazed by the image on the screen: that was a chaotic mess of magnified

CMYK - Five Dynasties, Xu Xi, Auspicious Magnolia Painting (DETAIL)

color pixels. I thought that effect was quite fascinating; it was an accidental gain.”² He thought there must be a way of using this to create a work of art, but he left this kernel of an idea to germinate for many years before taking it up.

The shortcomings of studying the history of art using reproductions become particularly obvious in a classroom setting. In a slide lecture—or Powerpoint lecture—every work of art discussed is projected with the same dimensions. An Ordos bronze is the same size as the Great Buddha of Bamiyan; a Song dynasty album leaf is no smaller than Fan Kuan’s *Travelers among Mountains and Streams*; an artist’s maquette is identical in size to the finished sculpture or building. Minor and major works assume equal significance: nothing is privileged by scale, placement, lighting, or any other visual factor. Images in books and on the Internet are subject to very similar distortions, and this is where people commonly glean their knowledge of art before they have the opportunity to encounter original works. In China, such opportunities are particularly rare, as no Chinese museums present a view of world art, nor do many display a comprehensive history of Chinese art.

Seeing a group of Yang Mian’s *CMYK* series paintings together fully reveals Yang Mian’s process as a supreme equalizer. Each painting, no matter the size, condition, medium, drama, or familiarity of the original, is of absolutely equal quality. The successive filters of camera, Internet, and Yang Mian’s process have conspired to equalize. This equalization both gives and takes. It enhances the scale and accessibility of the image, while imbuing it with a powerful new message and transferring it to the realm of contemporary art. At the same time, however, it takes away the original value and meaning and completely obscures the hand of the original artist. The result is such that, for example, a worked based on a Buddhist thangka has no more meaning than another based on an anonymous Northern Song painting of flowers and a cat. Nor do they differ much in spirit

from *CMYK Manet—The Guitar Player*. The most salient distinctions involve the composition, including the weight afforded the different colors.

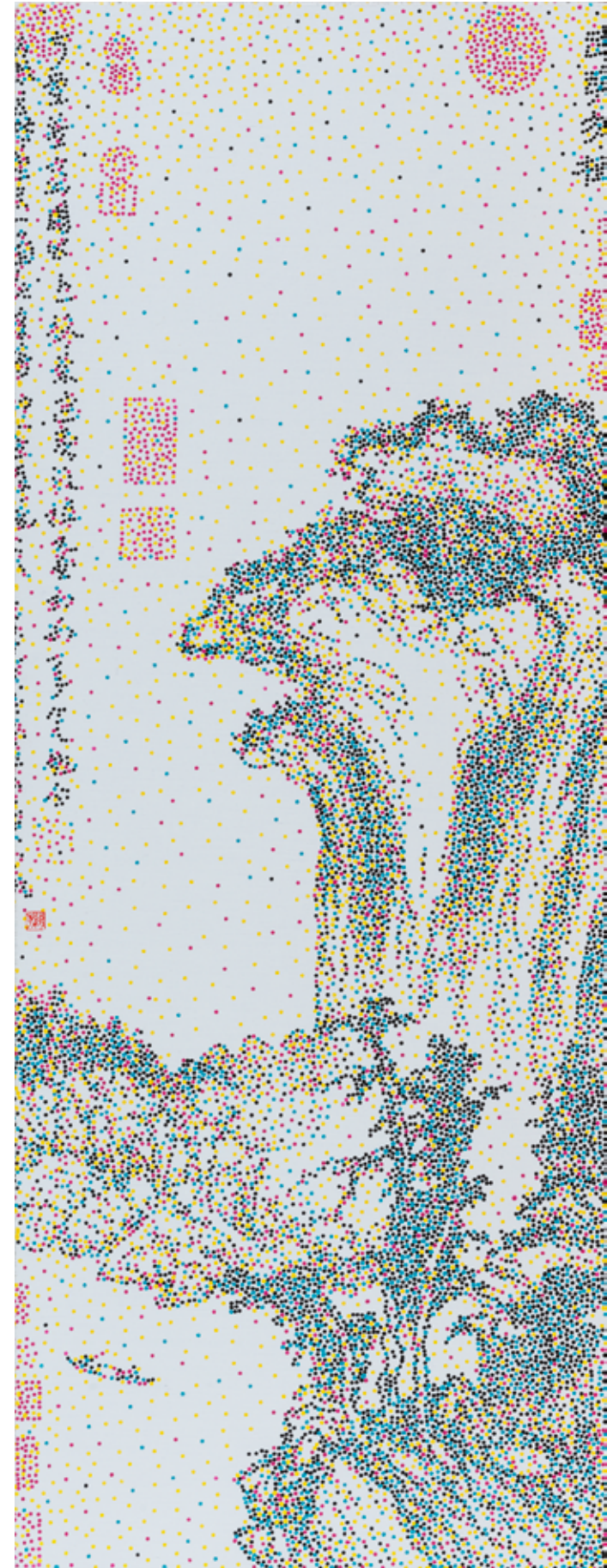
As mentioned before, the equalization of imagery is most apparent when the works are viewed in a group. For this reason, Yang Mian has conceived of this project as culminating in an exhibition. With the first floor of the Shanghai Art Museum in mind as the venue, he created works for each wall space in the vast main hall as well as the entrance hall. Framed by the elegant neoclassical columns dividing the exhibition hall into bays, each *CMYK* series painting can be considered alone, or viewed as part of a group, its stature enhanced by the museum’s majestic architecture and restrained palette of off-white walls and ceiling and limestone floor. Although there is a side-project of *CMYK* series paintings based on Western major masterpieces, the Shanghai Art Museum exhibition features exclusively Chinese art-based works.

Given that vision supposedly makes use of half the brain’s resources, it is no wonder that visual images exert a large impact on our thought processes. A single visual image can embody and express a great deal of information, and to analyze that information and its reliability can take more effort than the viewer is willing to expend. But if we are basing our knowledge of art history, or history, or current events on images, it is essential that we probe beyond an easy surface understanding. And only if we take the time to probe beyond the pretty surfaces of Yang Mian’s paintings do we finally arrive at this hard nugget of truth.

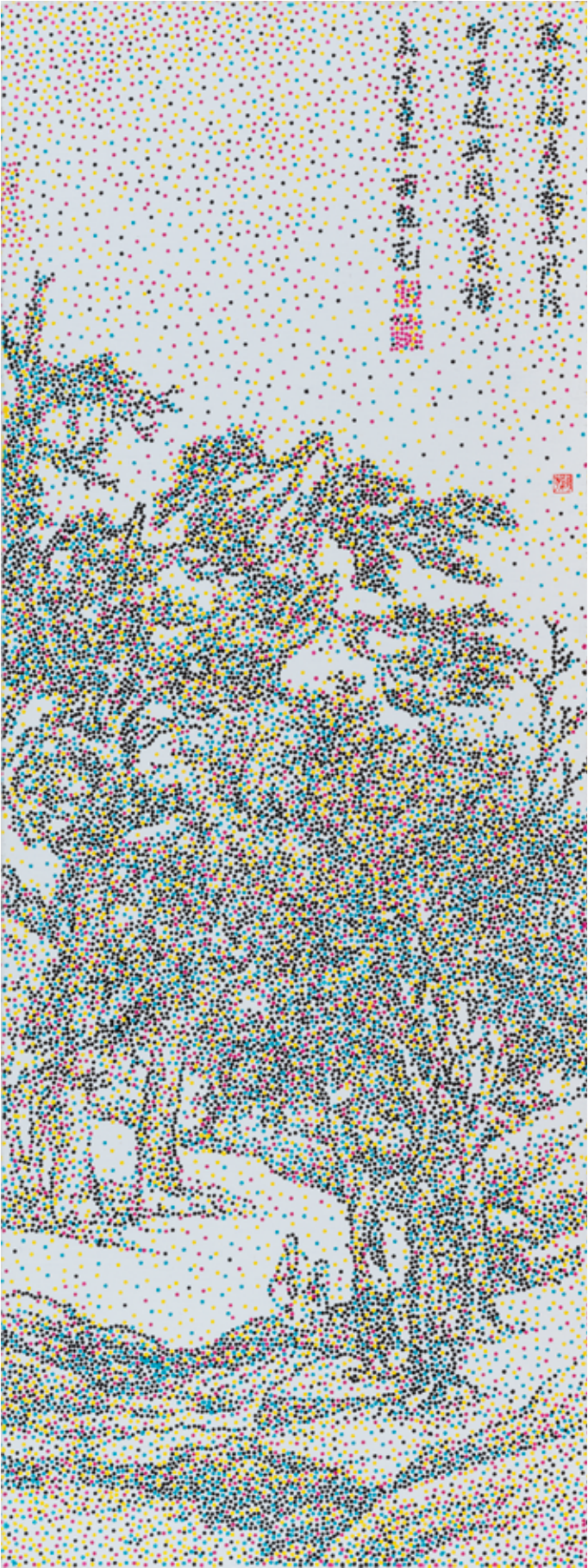
¹ Dyson, George. “Information Is Cheap, Meaning Is Expensive,” *The European*, Oct 17, 2011.

² Dialogue between Yin Yan and Yang Mian.

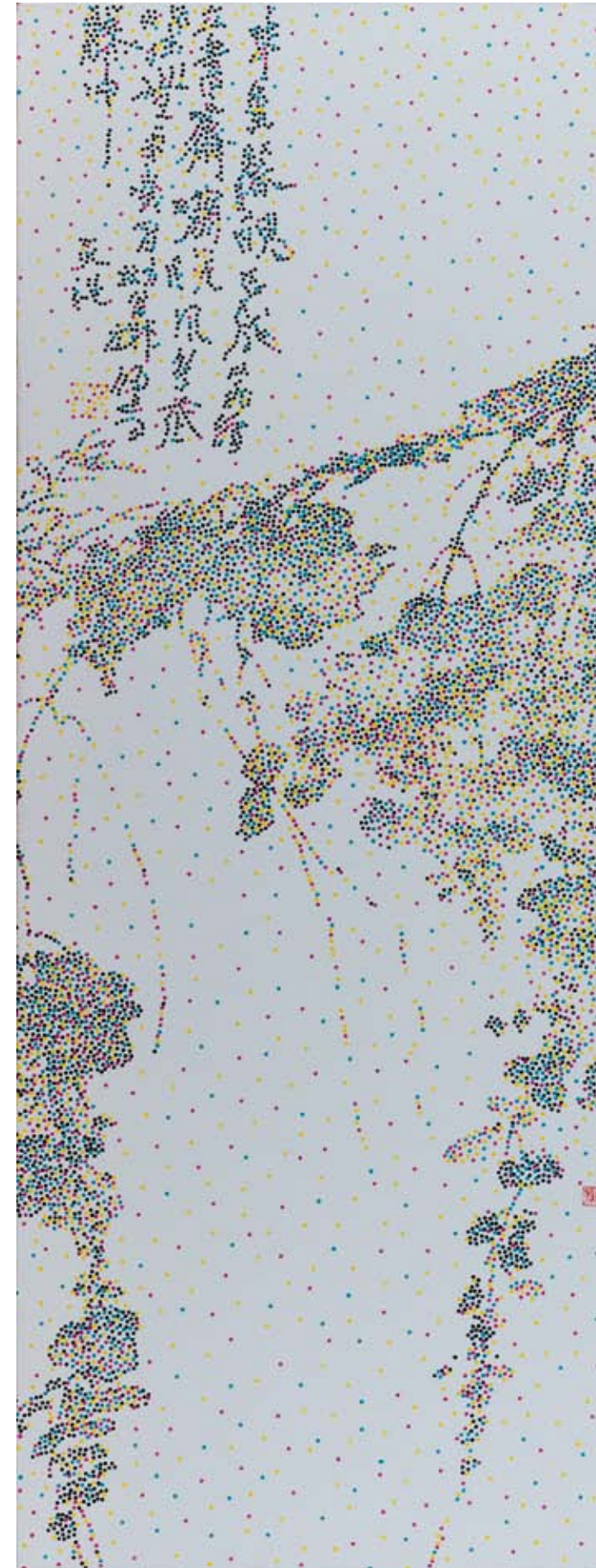
CMYK - Yuan Dynasty, Fang Congyi, *Sailing in Wuyi*, 2013
Acrylic on canvas, 63 x 23.5in | 160 x 60cm



CMYK - Ming Dynasty, Wen ZhengMing, Solitary View beside a Stream, 2013
Acrylic on canvas, 63x23,5in | 160 x 60cm

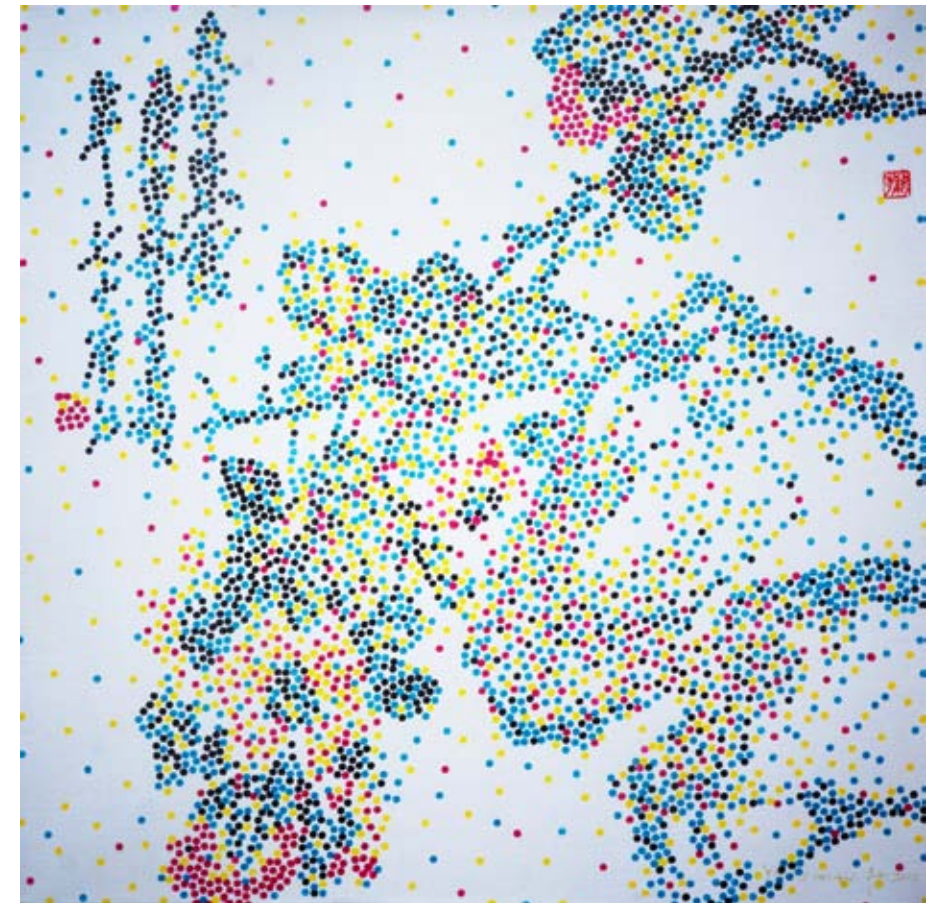


CMYK - Ming Dynasty, Xu Wei, Ink Grape Painting, 2013
Acrylic on canvas, 63 x 23,5in | 160 x 60cm





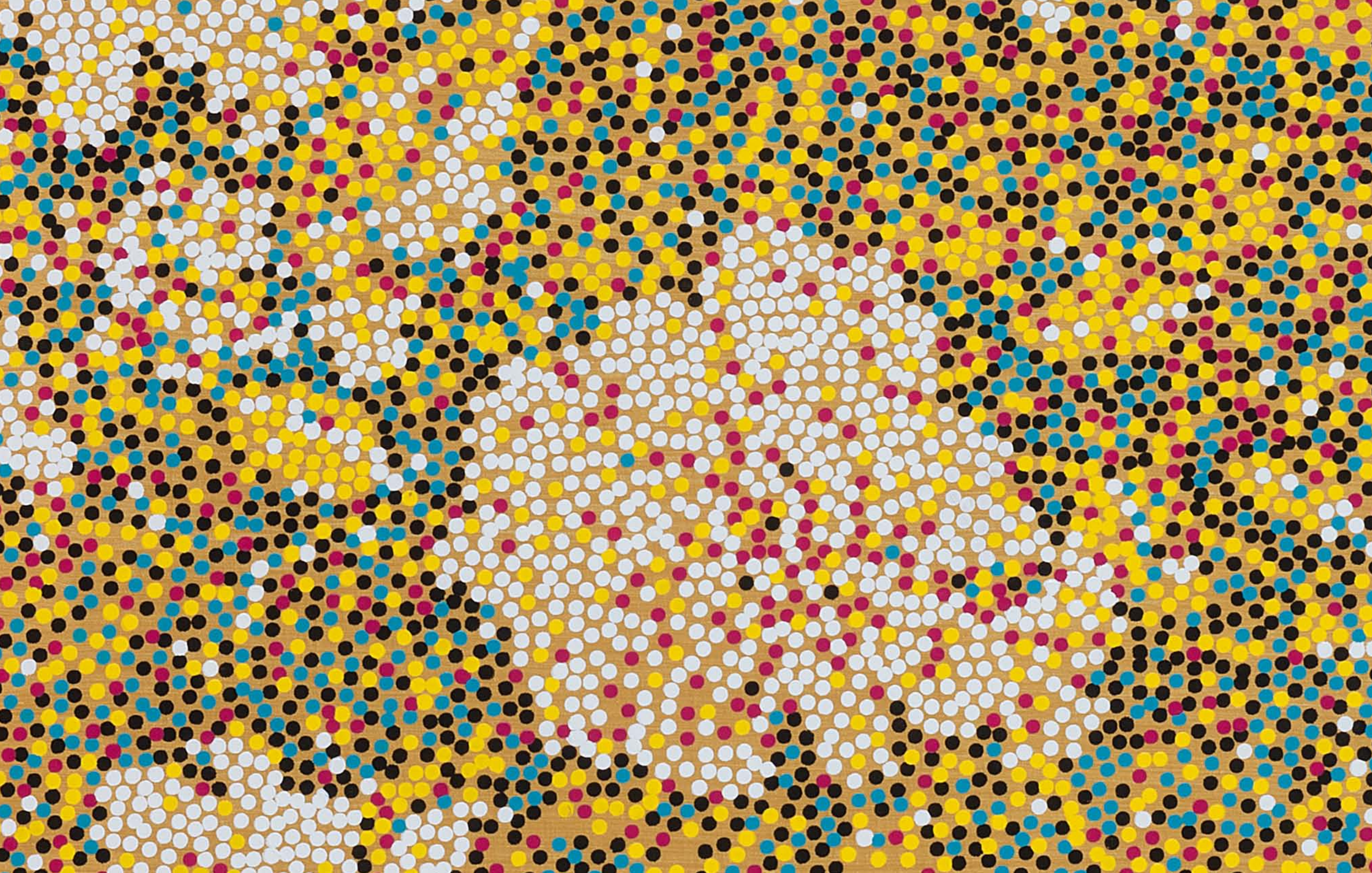
CMYK - Bird and Flower Painting No. 2, 2015
Acrylic on canvas, 19.5 x 19.5in | 50 x 50cm



CMYK - Bird and Flower Painting No. 4, 2015
Acrylic on canvas, 19.5 x 19.5in | 50 x 50cm



CMYK - Bird and Flower Painting No. 6, 2015
Acrylic on canvas, 19.5x19.5in | 50 x 50cm



CMYK - Five Dynasties, Xu Xi, Auspicious Magnolia Painting, 2016
Acrylic on canvas, 70.75 x 23.5in | 180 x 59cm





CMYK - Five Dynasties, Gu DeQian, Waterfowl and Lotuses, 2016
Acrylic on canvas, 63 x 37,5 in | 160 x 95 cm

CMYK - Yuan Dynasty, Lu Jingpu, *Flowers and Insects*, 2016
Acrylic on canvas, 69 x 37.5in | 175 x 95cm





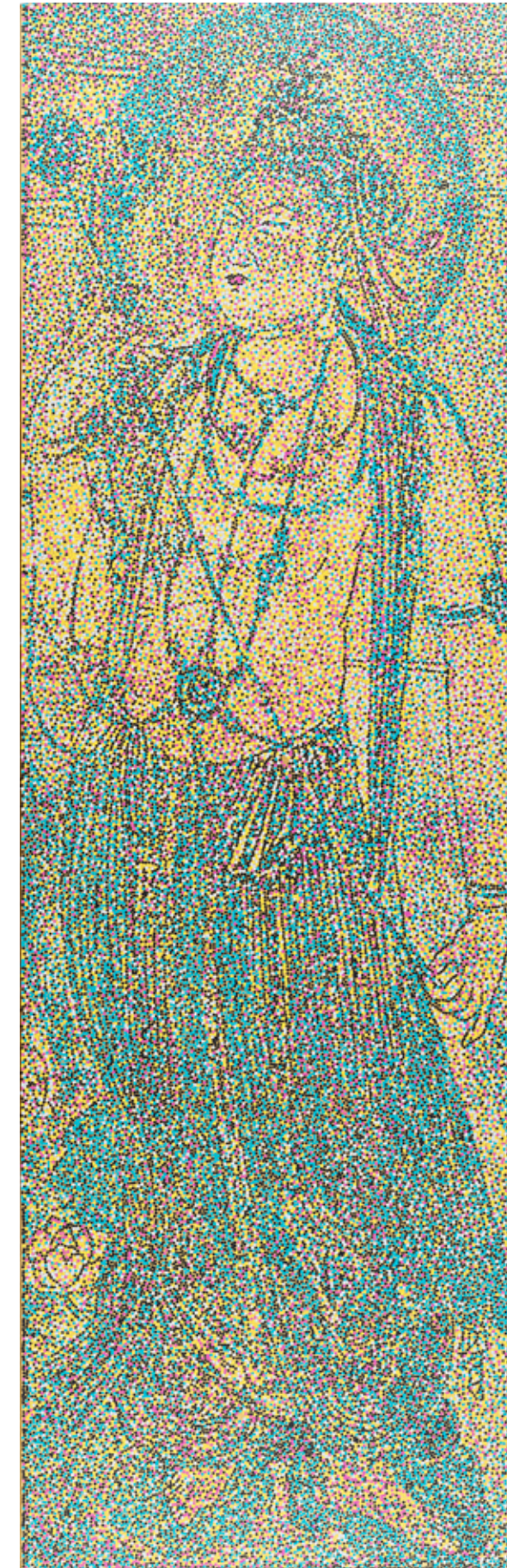


CMYK - Jin Dynasty Flying Apsaras, 2016
Acrylic on canvas, 39.25 x 55in | 100 x 140cm

CMYK - Five Dynasties Standing Bodhisattva No. 2, 2016
Acrylic on canvas, 86.5x27.5in | 220x70cm



CMYK - Five Dynasties Standing Bodhisattva No. 1, 2016
Acrylic on canvas, 86.5 x 27.5 in | 220 x 70 cm



CMYK - The Southern Song Dynasty, Li Di, Bird on a Snow-covered Tree, 2016
Acrylic on canvas, 69 x 31.5in | 175 x 80cm







CMYK - Ming Dynasty, Bodhisattva in Baoguo Temple in Pingwu, 2016
Acrylic on canvas, 39.25 x 31.5in | 100 x 80cm

Chronography

YANG MIAN

1970 Born in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, China
1997 Graduated from Sichuan Fine Art Institute with a Bachelor’s Degree
1997-16 Teaching, Dept. of Fine Art, Southwest Jiaotong University

Selected Solo Exhibitions

2016 “Yang Mian - New Paintings”, M. Sutherland Fine Arts, New York, NY, USA
“Yang Mian 2016”, A Thousand Plateaus Art Space, Chengdu, China
2012 “CMYK-Yang Mian Painting”, Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai, China
2008 “Posing”, Today Art Museum, Beijing, China
“From Classic to Standard”, Modernism Inc, San Francisco, USA
2007 “Classical”, Z-Art Center, Shanghai, China
2006 “2005 Yang Mian’s Standard”, 798 Space, Beijing, China
2004 “2003 Yang Mian’s Standard”, Xintiandi, Shanghai, China
1999 “The Beauty Standard”, Courtyard Gallery, Beijing, China

Selected Group Exhibitions

2016 “Time. Flip over”, Artron Art Museum, Shenzhen, China
2014 “Living in Chengdu”, Kuandu Museum of Fine art, Taipei, China Taiwan
Nanjin International Art Festival, Nanjing, China
“Present-ing Recital Louder Than Paint”, Shanghai Gallery Of Art, Shanghai, China
“Tunnel of Inspiration”, A4 Art Center, Chengdu, China
2013 St. Moritz Art Master Exhibition. St. Moritz, Switzerland
“Pure Views, Transformation of Chinese Contemporary Art”, L’arts Santa Monica
Art Center, Barcelona, Spain
“Pure Views, New Paintings from China – Traditions Reactivated”, Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum, Japan
2011 “Pure Views, New Painting from China”, Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, USA
2010 “Unable Absence-Contemporary Art exhibition of Wenxun”, Wenxun Art
Museum, Chengdu, China
“And-Writers”, 1st Nanjing Biennale, Jiangsu Art Museum, Jiangsu, China
“Pure Views-Remote from Streams and Mountains New Painting China”, Louise
Blouin Foundation, London. UK
“Reshaping History”, CNCC, Beijing, China

2008 “Reflective Asia-3rd Nanjing Triennial”, Nanjing Museum, Nanjing, China
“Enclaves: New Contemporary Paintings of China”, Square Gallery of
Contemporary Art, Nanjing, China
“The Sichuan Movement”, National Museum, Jakarta, Indonesia
2007 “The New Wind from China”, Gwangju Museum of Art, Gwangju, Korea
2006 “The Naked Truth: Six Chengdu-Based Chinese Contemporary Artists”, Tang
Gallery, Bangkok, Thailand
“Beyond Dimension: Chinese New Painting”, Square Gallery, Nanjing, China
2005 “Biennale of Contemporary Chinese Art”, Montpellier, France
“Mahjong: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection”, Kunstmuseum
Bern, Bern, Switzerland
Chengdu Biennale, Chengdu, China
2004 “4+1: New Chinese Contemporary Art Invitational Exhibition”, Asia Art Center,
Taipei
2003 The Third China National Exhibition of Oil Painting, Art Museum of China,
Beijing, China
“New Generation and Post-Revolution”, Yan Huang Art Museum, Beijing, China
2002 “Mirage: Contemporary Art Exhibition Suzhou Art Museum”, Shuzhou, China
2000 Family Exhibition Museum, Shanghai Furniture Warehouse, Shanghai, China
“Individual & Society in Art”, Guangdong Museum of Art, Guangdong, China
“The Chengdu Movement”, Canvas International Art, Amsterdam, Netherlands
1999 “99 Academic Exhibition”, Upriver Gallery, Chengdu, China
1998 “Changing Views”, Kunst 88 Museum, Almelo, Netherlands
1997 “Urban Individuality”, Chengdu Art Gallery, Chengdu, China
1996 “Personal Experience”, Gallery of the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts, Chong
ing, China

Awards

1998-99 Contemporary Chinese Art Awards (Switzerland - China Institute of
Contemporary Art)