

# A Study of Conceptual Deconstruction in the Paintings of Wang Xingwei

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DOI: 10.32629/asc.v3i3.945

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**Abstract:** The French philosopher Jacques Derrida was the founder of deconstructionist theory, and his idea of 'deconstruction' has influenced Western academia in many fields, including art, aesthetics and architecture. Chinese contemporary art has been influenced by his ideas, subverting the dichotomy of author and work. This essay presents a selection of typical paintings by the contemporary Chinese artist Wang Xingwei, focusing on the embodiment of conceptual deconstruction in his oil paintings and exploring how the artist uses 'deconstructive thinking' as a strategy in his creative work. Since the 1990s, he has been using his art to inquire into the meaning of painting, finding traces in art historical images and viewing habits, and repeatedly exploring and experimenting in his paintings. His references, borrowings and deconstructions of art history and visual history are not only full of wisdom, but also always display a special sense of humour.

**Keywords:** deconstruction, conceptuality, art historical images, quotation

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## 1. Overview of deconstruction

In the 1960s, the Jewish thinker Jacques Derrida, through his interviews with European literature, film, art, architecture, design and other artistic disciplines, proposed ways in which texts could be reconstructed. Reconstruction means breaking down the original structure of something, reassembling it, expanding it, and eventually forming something new [1]. The deeper meaning of reconstruction is the construction of the category of 'deconstruction', which also includes the meaning of reconstruction, and in this way reflects the ultimate need to reconstruct. Picasso, Bacon and Duchamp were among the pioneering artists who expressed the meaning of deconstruction in their painting styles. The 'deconstructive approach' thus gives artists and their artworks a new, alternative way of thinking about art, reflecting a break with previous works, both in terms of form and content. The structure of traditional artworks is about unity, expressing a deep aesthetic meaning from a complete and coherent structure. In contrast, artworks that express a deconstructed meaning usually bring a sense of suspense and constantly dispel visual expectations, and this change in form is also "a dismantling of a structure that was originally held together by a single medium" [2], thus conveying a new emotional expression through a new composition.

Deconstruction" in painting is a creative technique in which the artist uses existing classical patterns, linguistic symbols and materials to recombine and reconstruct them according to his own creative needs, forming a new pattern. In this process, the original meaning of the past is dismantled, and the borrowed essence is extracted and placed in a contrasting context, reflecting one's own personal thoughts on art, culture and social issues in the process of reconstruction.

## 2. Conceptual deconstruction in the paintings of Wang Xingwei

If the New Wave of the 8th Five-Year Plan is considered to be the origin of Chinese conceptual painting, then it can be said that for a long time, early Chinese conceptual painting presented a basic paradigm based on 'transplantation', which was the integration of China's local social reality into the Western conceptual. The basic paradigm of early Chinese conceptual painting, based on 'transplantation', was the integration of China's local social reality into the Western discourse of conceptual painting. It was not until the 1990s that this paradigm gradually improved and Chinese conceptual painting began to abandon, to varying degrees, the language of manual or expressive body painting, instead making the established 'image' the main content and object of its own creation. Among these, Wang Xingwei's series of conceptual experiments based on painting are particularly significant. In particular, the appropriation of Chinese and Western art history and the inherent 'deconstruction' in the works of this period not only break the cognitive habits and intellectual logic of the viewer, but also greatly expand the possibilities of the connotation of the medium of painting [3].

### 2.1 Elements and restructuring

Born in 1969 in Shenyang, Wang Xingwei is a pictorial thinker in contemporary Chinese art. Different elements can always be seen in Wang Xingwei's paintings at different times. He is like a master of permutations and combinations, historical figures, yellow shirts, navy, nurses, soldiers, old ladies, scenes from fairy tales, penguins, pandas and watermelons

all appear, anything that Wang Xingwei thinks fits the narrative and formal requirements becomes an element in his paintings.

He chooses the content and elements of his works spontaneously, building on his previous experience and looking for a direction that interests him. The image of the "old lady" comes from an advertisement booklet for a pre-test class that Wang Xingwei saw in front of the Central Academy of Fine Arts; the anti-Japanese theme comes from the "anti-Japanese divine drama". He deconstructs the text into symbols, and then migrates and reorganises them.

## 2.2 Appropriation and adaptation of 'ready-made images'

Figure 1, *The Standard Expressions of the Post-1985 Generation*, is one of Wang Xingwei's most iconic masterpieces. He selects typical images of figures created by successful artists who gained attention in the 1990s in the field of Chinese painting under the Western perspective, and appropriates and reorganises them. In Wang Xingwei's understanding, these standard expressions have a degree of commonality, and their juxtaposition is an ironic and critical response to the representations and status of artists at a time when Chinese art was going international. As such, it is also regarded as one of the landmark works of early Chinese conceptual painting.



Figure 1. Wang Xingwei's Standard Expression after 85

Wang Xingwei's early works contain some dialogue with the classics of Western art history, as well as anxieties and critiques of the local Chinese environment. Figure 2, *Poor Old Hamilton*, is an important representative of this phase. The young boy in police uniform stands resignedly in front of Duchamp's *The Great Glass*, with Wang Xingwei himself as the protagonist with his back to us; on the wall of the room hangs Duchamp's bearded *Mona Lisa*, and a dying Hamilton sits in a chair wearing Chinese cloth shoes, staring with anger at the man who is lecturing his son because the mischievous child has broken the British artist's painstakingly made replica. Looking back at the social environment in which the artist was working, contemporary art exhibitions in China in the 1990s were often banned by the police, as the law enforcers could not understand the newly emerging contemporary art, so Wang Xingwei's cultural aspirations are expressed through his works, with the child in the picture being the personification of the Chinese police and Duchamp's *Big Glass* being an iconic work of Western contemporary art. Wang Xingwei has effectively grafted classic elements from Western art history with scenes from Chinese families, thus giving the images a narrative thread that can be interpreted, creating a comedic and even absurd effect.



Figure 2. Wang Xingwei's Poor Old Man Milton

Wang Xingwei's approach to 'appropriation' began to take a new turn when he created Figure 3, *The Morality of Awakening*. In this work, there is a 'duality' of structure - a 'realistic scenario from China' and 'the basic iconography of art historical classics' [4]. In the painting, a typical office environment of post-reform and opening-up China comes into view, with standardised desks of the era and paperwork and stationery scattered across the table, prompting the viewer to inadvertently recall the burgeoning companies that emerged from the economic tide of the era. A woman in professional attire, as if she were a clerk, is posed to sit on the seemingly suited boss, suggesting an ambiguous relationship between the two. This is Wang Xingwei's realistic imagining of the social problems of the rising economy, distorted social relations and abrupt changes in values, and in the process of conceiving the imagery, the artist deliberately frames the image in an ironic moment.



Figure 3. Wang Xingwei's *The Morality of Awakening*

However, it is worth pointing out that Wang Xingwei's realistic imagery is not without roots, but is based on a link to historical imagery, i.e. an adaptation of a visual resource from the art historical lineage - the famous work 'Awakening of Conscience' by the English Pre-Raphaelite painter Hunt. By transforming the background and furniture, Wang Xingwei has naturally transposed the English setting into the unique Chinese context of the period, but in addition, the poses, expressions and relationships between the figures in the painting have been preserved intact, thus highlighting the interconnectedness of the issues of the different eras. This is the wisdom of Wang Xingwei's conception of art; he does not forcefully return, nor does he ever simply enter, but only borrows part of the framework, thus involving his own conception.

Since the mid-nineties, Wang Xingwei has pioneered a highly persuasive view of painting. Like other Chinese painters of his generation, Wang Xingwei has inherited the grand tradition of socialist realism. Not only has he mastered the grammar and vocabulary of this mode of painting, but he has also remained reflectively alert to the visual language he has inherited, constantly refining it as he uses it. Through his witty and eccentric perceptions over the past two decades, Wang Xingwei has produced a rich body of work that deftly connects Western referential objects, revolutionary traditions and the cultural context of the present. Throughout his career, Wang Xingwei has continually asked the question: how does painting create meaning? From his early use of images and compositions from art history, to a series of experiments with the material aspects of painting, to the seemingly perverse connections between several recurring themes and archetypes in his recent work, Wang explores grand ideas of self-formation, social relations, knowledge, and love. His references are never-ending and all-encompassing, appropriating not only scenes and characters, but also styles and traditions. This borrowing is always accompanied by subtle repetition and variation, and always with a keen sense of humour.

### 3. Conclusion

As the undisputed flagship figure of Chinese conceptual painting, Wang Xingwei's paintings borrow extensively from Chinese and foreign art historical sources, provocatively 'adapting and deconstructing' art historical texts and cultural classics, through the appropriation and splicing of images, the quotation and variation of texts to present a personal and highly shocking visual expression. What he has created is a truly postmodern work, a series of paintings from the 1990s that appear to be a tampering and collage of ideas, styles, images and interests taken from art history, but are in fact aimed at the mutual guidance, implication and stimulation of texts. Their aim is not to paint 'one painting', but to evoke another or more

paintings. The importance of these paintings in the history of art, and their intricate relationship to each other, will raise questions and reflections on historical facts and narratives.

## References

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