

# Xu Jiang: Mountains In My Mind

2023.11.5 - 12.10

Curator: Peng Feng

Hosts: China Academy of Art, China Oil Painting Society

Organizers: Tang Contemporary Art, The Sunflower Art Center

Tang Contemporary Art, Beijing 1<sup>st</sup> Space & 2<sup>nd</sup> Space

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Tang Contemporary Art is pleased to announce the launch of Xu Jiang's major exhibition, "All Thoughts of Mountains", on 5 November 2023 in Beijing's First and Second Spaces. Curated by Peng Feng, the exhibition will feature more than 100 oil paintings and video works created by Xu Jiang from 2000 to the present, under the themes of "Montiform Sunflower Garden" and "Mountains in My Mind" in each of the two spaces. The exhibition will open at 4pm on 5 November, with an artist guided tour at 1:30pm.

## Montiform Sunflower Garden

Xu Jiang enjoys painting sunflowers, transforming them beyond botanical identities into powerful symbols.

In his artwork sunflowers always appear in groups. Even when depicted as individual blooms, they are often displayed in clusters; creating a majestic and overwhelming spectacle.

The symbolically rich sunflowers are particularly suited for conceptual installations, akin to Xu Jiang's "Is Symbiosis Possible?" However, this has not halted Xu Jiang's painting endeavors, as questions raised in this installation can only be answered through art.

Xu Jiang continues his sunflower odyssey. "Portraits of the Sunflower Garden," a composition of clustered sunflower heads, evokes thoughts of Warhol's iconic "Marilyn Portraits." Both are portraits that gain significance through repetition.

In the consumer landscape, where most see materialism, Foucault perceives Zen. Warhol's works attain their essence through abundance, the more, the merrier. When identical artworks continuously appear, they point to something beyond the immediate image, transcending the visual, leaning into Zen, and venturing into the realm of "void."

Xu Jiang's sunflowers not only convey a sense of "void," but a concept of "Unique Existence in True Void," more profoundly. His artworks may appear similar at first glance, but possess distinct essences. The subject matter may share commonalities, but their representation varies; the visual portrayal might seem similar, but the techniques employed differ; the artistic execution appears alike, yet the emotional context distinguishes them. The more we contemplate Xu Jiang's sunflowers, the more we perceive the interplay of similarities and distinctions. Xu Jiang skillfully employs this interplay to accentuate the uniqueness associated with the concept of "existence."

Perhaps this is why Xu Jiang keeps painting sunflowers.

Xu Jiang's sunflowers suggest that coexistence is possible, through a series of similarities and differences. Conflicts between the individual and the collective, often seen as unsolvable in theory, can only find resolution in reality. Through his persistent artistic endeavors and the daily toil of creation, Xu Jiang brings us back from the realm of unsolvable concepts to the of solvable realities, demonstrating that the individual can indeed unite with the collective.

Xu Jiang's sunflowers are a portrayal of a generation.

## Mountains in My Mind

Chinese culture reveres the majesty of mountains. These landscapes represent not only the beauty of nature but also carry profound cultural symbolism. Consequently, mountains and rivers have become central themes in Chinese poetry and painting.

Interestingly, the same visual art, referred to as "landscape" in Western contexts, is denoted as "shanshui" (literally means mountains and water bodies) in the realm of traditional Chinese painting.

It's worth noting that "landscape" is a relatively modern concept, emerging only after people have distanced themselves from their natural habitats; this kind of landscape is primarily an object of observation. "Shanshui" is not merely objects of contemplation; they constitute environments for existence, extensions of life. Thus, they are not solely objects of visual appreciation but also sources of inspiration and sites for dwelling. The difference in landscapes and "shanshui" extends beyond matters of medium and technique; it holds a different view and ways of life.

Xu Jiang, an accomplished oil painter, prefers to label his creations as "shanshui" rather than mere "landscape." Clearly, his admiration is no longer limited to the medium and technique employed in oil painting; it ventures into their spirits. However, many artists prioritize technique, Xu Jiang stands as an exception; he has long since mastered the technical aspects of his craft. Instead, his focus is delving into the profound depths of existence — depths that harmonize the self with the world.

While sunflowers are a subject that Xu Jiang consciously selects, mountains and rivers represent his predestined sanctuary, an unconscious collective embodiment. Xu Jiang wears the hats of both painter and poet, readily finding resonance within classical verses, thus allowing him to think across the centuries and witness distant horizons. This world steeped in poetry forms the very foundation of Xu Jiang's existence.

Thanks to the robust sense of self, Xu Jiang has uncovered his spiritual refuge amidst the mountains and rivers. His canvases have gradually grown more compact, allowing the images to engage in a dialogue between the self and its essence. The self slowly fades and ascends, achieving a harmonious union with the natural world. Subject matter no longer dictates his choices. Instead, it becomes a vessel for conveying deeper meanings, transcending the self to attain perfect alignment with nature. In Xu Jiang's "shanshui" artworks, a new realm unfolds where subject and object merge, evoking a profound sense of unity, aptly encapsulated in the words of Wang Lv, an ancient Chinese painter: "Having been a guest for an extended stay, departing hastily is not an option."

## Soul of the Blooming Mountain

Xu Jiang paints sunflowers as he paints mountains. Even in his early works that featured urban themes, the essence of mountains was ever-present.

When seen through the lens of mountains, sunflowers, cities, or ruins, they take on a distinctive allure.

Mountains are the unconscious essence of Xu Jiang, including both his personal, collective and cultural unconscious. In art, the unconscious tends to overcome the control of consciousness and manifest itself inadvertently. So, it's not unusual to sense the feeling of mountains in Xu Jiang's paintings.

Certainly, this doesn't imply that you must discern mountain shapes in Xu Jiang's art. It's akin to Wei Shuo's perspective on calligraphy. When she speaks of "horizontal stroke (in Chinese characters)," it evokes images of cloud formations stretching over miles, yet it doesn't suggest that "horizontal stroke" should be literally represented as clouds. Similarly, when she characterizes "dot," it inspires ideas of peaks plummeting like rocks, but it doesn't entail that "dot" should be literally represented as solid stones. In this context, "similarity" isn't confined to physical resemblance but pertains to an affinity in sensation. Indeed, if the shapes were remarkably alike, the unconscious wouldn't overcome conscious control. It's the divergence in shapes that allows the unconscious to elude conscious restrictions. We identify it as the unconscious precisely because it preserves a sense of similarity.

Xu Jiang's art holds its worth in its innate and unassuming character, authenticity, and professionalism. We admire Xu Jiang's art because these inherent qualities consistently strike a chord with us.

Returning to one's true self and the essence of authenticity is an absolute command. However, it's crucial to recognize that not all instances of the true self or authenticity hold the same value. While individuals can use their talents, and objects may fulfill their purposes, the magnitude and significance of these can vary widely. Xu Jiang's nature, like a mountain, inherently bears the weight of mountains. Within his works, the prevailing themes of unwavering determination, tragic consciousness, and romantic sentiments together form the most powerful and resonant melody in contemporary Chinese art.

## About Artist

**Xu Jiang**, currently serving as the Director of the Academic Committee and a Professor at the China Academy of Art, holds several significant positions in arts and culture. Some of his worth-mentioning roles include Vice Chairman of the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, President of the China Oil Painting Society, Vice Chairman of the China Artists Association, and Chairman of the Zhejiang Provincial Federation of Literary and Art Circles. Additionally, he has contributed as a member of the 13th and 14th Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC).

Xu Jiang did his graduation from the Oil Painting Department of the China Academy of Art in the early 1980s and pursued further studies at the University of Fine Arts in Hamburg, Germany. He held the position of President of the China Academy of Art for two decades (2001 to 2020).

He has been honored with numerous prestigious awards and accolades throughout his career. Not limited to the esteemed title of "National Exemplary Middle-aged and Young Artist of Both Moral and Artistic Stature;" being acknowledged as one of the exceptional talents within the national publicity and culture system; categorized under the "Four Batches" talent project; his contributions have also been recognized with the State Council's Special Allowance and the designation of "Top Expert" in Zhejiang Province. Xu Jiang is celebrated as an Exemplary Educator in Zhejiang Province and has been regarded with the "National Model Teaching Team in the Style of Huang Danian" by the Ministry of Education. In addition to these accolades, he has received prestigious awards such as the "Lu Xun Art Award," the "Excellent Work Award" at the Second Beijing Biennale, and the "National Teaching Achievement Award."

As a leading figure in the realm of Chinese expressive painting, Xu Jiang has been invited to showcase his works at prestigious international exhibitions, including the Venice Biennale of Architecture, the Sao Paulo Art Biennial, and the Shanghai Biennale. In the new millennium, he embarked on creating the "Sunflower Grove" series, which has been featured in major solo exhibitions at esteemed art institutions both in China and worldwide. These exhibitions include "Overlooking" (2006, National Art Museum of China), "Redemption of a Sunflower Garden" (2009, Shanghai Art Museum), "To Sunflower Grove" (2010, Zhejiang Art Museum), "Sunflowers on the Horizon" (2011, Suzhou Museum), "Re-Generation" (2012, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Germany), "Flourishing Spirits: Joint Exhibition of Xu Jiang and Shi Hui" (2013, Ludwig Museum, Coblenz, Germany), "Oriental Sunflower" (2014, National Museum of China), "Oriental Sunflower II – Reports from Sunflower Grove" (2015, China Art Museum, Shanghai, China), "A Tribute to Sunflowers" (2018, Shanghai Minsheng Art Museum), "Xu Jiang: Eastern Sunflowers" (2019, The State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia), "A Tribute to Sunflowers" (2019, Shandong Art Museum), "Flowered Mountains and Rivers: Opening Exhibition of Sunflowers on the Horizon Art Center" (2020, Sunflowers on the Horizon Art Center, Hangzhou, China) and "Visionary: The Works of Xu Jiang" (2023, Shanghai Jiushi Art Museum). His works have garnered acclaim and found a home in numerous international art museums.

As a trailblazer in contemporary Chinese art, Xu Jiang played a pivotal role in founding and promoting major international academic platforms in China such as the "Shanghai Biennale," "Guangzhou Triennial," "Hangzhou · Chinese Painting Biennale," and "Chinese Oil Painting Biennale." His significant presence as the Chairman of the Academic Committee for the Shanghai Biennale and has curated noteworthy exhibitions like "Techniques of the Visible: The 2004 Shanghai Biennale," "Living in Time: 29 Zeitgenössische Künstler aus China" (Berlin, 2001), "Edges of the Earth: Migration of Contemporary Asian Art and Regional Politics" (Hangzhou, 2003), "Writing and Non-Writing: Hangzhou International Modern Calligraphy Art Exhibition" (I-IV, 2005-2019), and "Hangzhou · Chinese Painting Biennale" (I-VI, 2010-2023).

Over the years, Xu Jiang has published a series of personal art books, including "Chess, Paper, Art" (1995), "Overlooking the City" (2001), "Shanghai Mirage" (2001), "Contemporary Art and Local Culture" (2002), "On the Earth" (2002), "Overlooking - Xu Jiang's Paintings" (2006), "Redemption of a Sunflower Garden - New Works by Xu Jiang" (2009), "To Sunflower Grove" (2010), "Re-Generation" (2012), "Flourishing Spirits" (2013), "Oriental Sunflower" (2014), "Oriental Sunflower II – Reports from Sunflower Grove" (2015), "A Tribute to Sunflowers - Works of Xu Jiang" (2018), "Six Chapters of the Tribute to Sunflowers - Works of Xu Jiang" (2019), and "Visionary: The Works of Xu Jiang" (2023). He has also published academic collections such as "Vigil at One Meter" (2005), "Sight Seen Cities" (2005), "Portraits of South Mountains" (2008), "Deconstruction and Reconstruction of the Local" (2010), "Horizons of the University" (2010), "Diary of a Visionary" (2010), "Text and Art" (2011), "Sunflower Grove Dictionary" (2012), "Sunflower Grove Notes" (2014), "Sunflower Grove Commentaries" (2015), "Collected Works of Xu Jiang" (2018), and "Portraits of South Mountains II" (2018). Additionally, he has edited more than 150 academic books.

## About Curator

A Ph.D. of Peking University, **PENG Feng** is professor of art theory and criticism and the dean of School of Arts at Peking University. He was elected the vice president of International Association for Aesthetics in 2022. He has published 17 academic books and over 200 papers in Chinese and English. He is a freelance art critic and curator of exhibitions at international level. He has curated dozens of important art exhibitions, including the China Pavilion at the 54th international art exhibition of Venice Biennale 2011. He is a playwright and wrote over 10 plays for musical, drama, dance and movie. A profile with the title "Peng Feng: Professional Professor, Amateur Curator" was published in Art in America, July 2013.

