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Essay: Passion Statement – Avant-garde Artist Concocts Social Commentary From Art

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Wang Jin
Beijing

Passion Statement

Avant-garde artist concocts social commentary from art

By Matei Mihalca

Wang Jin's shoulder-length hair and all-black outfits must have frightened farmers in rural Daxing county. As they worked outside Beijing, in fields severed by a railway line under construction, Wang staged an unusual critique of materialistic culture in contemporary China.

Like a magician bent over a metal jar, Wang prepared a peculiar potion. He mixed red paint with thousands of U.S. dollars' worth of products — many of them alien to local farmers, including facial cream, Ivory soap, Coke, Contac cold-relief pills and virility tablets. "Chinese society, it's all in here," he says of his liquid kaleidoscope. Wang then applied his concoction to 200 metres of metal rail tracks and wooden sleepers.

Wang, 32, sees this work as a commentary on the economic effervescence that is transforming China. It reflects the railroad's impact, he says, which will change the face of Daxing county when it links Beijing to Kowloon in 1997.

"Red is the colour of the revolution, but also that of lipstick and nail polish," Wang notes. "It is also the only [colour] trains are scared of."

Trains won't likely come to a halt at the sight of Wang's red rails. But he feels it's his duty to make people stop and think. "My work is distinctly social," he notes, pointing to the components of his red potpourri and to a mural of U.S. dollar bills he painted on centuries-old bricks

from the Forbidden City.

"Beauty products beautify the world, medicines cure its ills," he says of his two favourite ingredients. And, he adds drily, both are in growing demand in China today.

Wang emphasises medicine in his work. He sees himself akin to a doctor (rather than a make-up artist) who examines China and prescribes a potion to heal its ailments. The government doesn't like his diagnoses: Beijing deems Wang's brand of conceptual art unacceptable. When he enters the official China Art Gallery, a minder joins him for the tour — just to ensure Wang won't engage in some wacky counter-revolutionary performance art.

At first sight, Wang's bravado contrasts sharply with his upbringing: He grew up in a military compound. The access to information it offered, he says, helped foster his artistic interests.

"My father spent his whole life fighting for the revolution," says Wang, who is no longer welcome in his family's home. "He thinks I'm up to no good. But if my father opposes my work," he adds with a smile, "then I know I'm on the right track."

Watching his father's colleagues in the shower triggered his interest in drawing. "Stripped of their uniforms, they were so different from real life," he explains. "But I discovered that, when nude, everyone's the same." After graduating from the prestigious Zhejiang Institute of Fine Arts, Wang was sent to the Beijing Fashion Institute to teach drawing; ironically, his

assigned specialty was nude sketchings.

But Wang eschewed figure-painting for art as social commentary. He resigned from his post in 1992 and has since relied on selling traditional oil paintings — not his avant-garde events — to make a living. He has never worked outside China, although his wife went to study design in the United States about five years ago and has not returned.

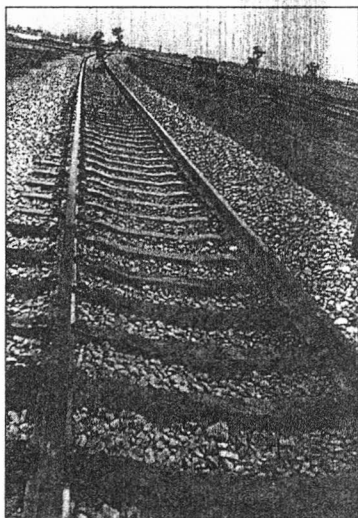
"Walls," his first project as an independent artist, was staged in an area of demolished traditional one-floor houses in downtown Beijing. Then, as now, Beijing tore down the capital's old neighbourhoods to make way for five-star hotels and office blocks. "I'm interested in expressing feelings," Wang says. "Not my own, but common sentiments."

Using thick strokes of Chinese black ink, Wang painted chairs, tables and vases on walls still standing amid the rubble. "I can't rebuild the past," Wang explains, "but I can evoke it."

His critics remark that Wang's colour splashes are only a step above vandalism. "It's paradoxical that Wang objects to China's growing industrialisation and commercialisation while adding to one of their worst effects: pollution," says a Beijing journalist. "Most contemporary Chinese artists evoke the same binomes: past-present, East-West, communism-capitalism. It's time to go beyond American dollar signs."

He may have a point. But Wang spruces up his tired theme with a poignant dash. With a French cologne spray, he drew contours of images on a derelict wall inside the Forbidden City. The scent lingered briefly on the bricks, then vanished. "That's precisely the point," he says of lost images. "So many of the things in our lives are ephemeral."

Matei Mihalca is a graduate student in Chinese history at Harvard University.



The Wang touch.