

GLOBAL CONTEMPORARY ARTIST ANALYSIS

ARCHIVE PROJECT

QIU XIAOFEI: POSSIBLE SUBTITLE ON GLOBAL THEME(S)

SILVEY MCGREGOR, BFA GRAPHIC DESIGN, 2022



[Image: Qiu Xiaofei. Photo: Aria Isadora/BFA.com]

This short art analysis paper accompanies an original video presentation produced by UTC undergraduate students, dedicated to the work of a contemporary artist and developed as part of ART 4190r: Global Contemporary Art course in Spring 2021.

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Qiu Xiaofei is a multidisciplinary contemporary artist who was born in Heilongjiang, China in 1977. Qiu Xiaofei studied at the Subsidiary School of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing until 1998. He then went on to receive a Bachelor of Fine Arts in oil painting from China Central Academy of Fine Arts in 2002. Qiu had little support from galleries or government associations within China, leading to the founding of an artist group, N12, along with eleven of his peers from CAFA.¹

Xiaofei is a representative figure of China's New Generation Artists who has been featured in exhibitions internationally including Beijing Contemporary Art Museum (2001), Kunstmuseum Bern, Switzerland (2005), Tate Liverpool (2007), Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing (2013), Tampa Museum of Art and the Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, Florida (2014), Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing (2018).²

Xiaofei has "been painting for nearly 20 years and his oeuvre is characterized by numerous changes and developments."³ Xiaofei creates work that is concerned

¹ Liu, Prynne. 2015. "The Investment Potential of Emerging Chinese Contemporary Artists Who Grew Up in the Post-Mao Era." Order No. 1598577, Sotheby's Institute of Art - New York. <https://proxy.lib.utc.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.proxy.lib.utc.edu/dissertations-theses/investment-potential-emerging-chinese>

² Qiu Xiaofei." Pace Gallery. Pace Gallery. Accessed April 28, 2021.

³ Fallen, Katie. "Qiu Xiaofei at Pace Gallery, New York." Ocula the best in contemporary art icon. Ocula, August 7, 2020.

with the psychological state of the creator, among many other themes and inspirations. As a multidisciplinary artist, Xiaofei focuses mainly on painting as his primary practice while incorporating sculpture and installation throughout his work and in dialogue with his painting practices.⁴

His practices include oil painting, watercolor, drawing, sculpture, and installation, while his work engages conceptual relationships between history and experiences. Xiaofei's approach is often changing as, he "began working in a representational style until around 2012 when his practice radically shifted towards the abstract."⁵ His current work "combines drawings with sculptures and act as a chronological recorder of the artists' history."⁶ Although he "engages with history, as embodied by the representational forms and socialist realist imagery in his early paintings, he also assimilates these traditions into expressions of individual experience and family history."⁷

Xiaofei's practices and approaches to making work have changed several times throughout his life, while processing his own identity and a cultural identity. His practice parallels that of Stuart Hall's thinking that identity is "a matter of

⁴ Chen, Liang. An artist's case-study exhibition Qiu Xiaofei_New Century Art Foundation. NC Art Foundation, September 12, 2020.

http://www.ncartfoundation.org/en/Beijing/Qiu_Xiaofei/2020/0908/416.html.

⁵ Fallen, Katie. "Qiu Xiaofei at Pace Gallery, New York."

⁶ "Qiu Xiaofei." Pace Gallery. Pace Gallery. Accessed April 28, 2021.

⁷ Dongdong, Sun. 2021. "Sun Dongdong on Qiu Xiaofei." *Artforum International*, 04.

<https://proxy.lib.utc.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest.com.proxy.lib.utc.edu/magazines/sun-dongdong-on-qiu-xiaofei/>

‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being.’⁸ Through his work the viewer can see that cultural identity doesn’t just belong to the past but is just as evident in the present.⁹ In Xiaofei’s piece *Utopia, 2010*, his earlier representational style is present throughout. This large oil painting, scaling to 118 1/8 in x 157 1/2 in, evokes a feeling of terror through the scene of a headless figure standing atop four free standing skyscrapers, looking down upon a mass of head-like spheres below. The piece is comprised of dark, muted oil paints that draw on a notion of lifelessness. *Utopia* “evokes a rugged and desecrated urban landscape punctuated by a clunky, damaged statue – very likely a headless Mao.”¹⁰

With his work drawing on histories, both personal and cultural, Xiaofei is responding to the state of China throughout his life. In this piece we can see that “histories have their real, material and symbolic effects.”¹¹ Placing the looming figure among a platform of skyscrapers points to the way in which “China’s super-cities have displaced and disrupted the lives of former country dwellers and moved them into concrete block purgatories.”¹² Everything within the piece then points back to the headless figure above it all.

While *Utopia* is more representational in figures, it is balanced with abstract strokes that are expressive of the artist. Throughout his work “there are a lot of

⁸ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” in Jonathan Rutherford (editor), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990.

⁹ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”

¹⁰ Seed, John. “China’s Young Postmodern, Post-Mao Artists.” Hyperallergic, July 10, 2015. <https://hyperallergic.com/220177/chinas-young-post-modern-post-mao-artists/>.

¹¹ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora.”

¹² Seed, John. “China’s Young Postmodern, Post-Mao Artists.”

spheres, spirals, and even figures of dictators being contrasted with [his] abstract expressionist base.”¹³ These elements are repeating symbols across many pieces, tying together the themes of history and experiences throughout time. As evident in *Utopia*, the spheres scattered across the bottom of the picture represent death for Xiaofei.¹⁴ In this piece in particular, they stand in for “the skulls of people being killed by a dictator.”¹⁵

The presence of the symbolic spheres can be seen throughout Xiaofei’s work, and are evident in his much later, and significantly more abstract work. While his more current work is much more improvisational and abstract, it is not mutually exclusive from the symbolic nature of his past style. This drastic change in style correlates with the drastic transformation that is being experienced in China and that Xiaofei has experienced in his lifetime. The change in his reality is effecting the change in his painting practices.¹⁶ The conflicting nature of society can be seen represented in the conflicting nature of the representational symbols intermingled with the thick abstract strokes of expressive nature within pieces like *Tape Junk No. 2, 2015*.¹⁷

This piece combines the symbolic spheres throughout the bottom section of the piece, marching down a line and disappearing into a tangle of swirls and lines, with a vortex of abstract brush strokes and paint drippings. This juxtaposition of

¹³ Fallen, Katie. “Qiu Xiaofei at Pace Gallery, New York.”

¹⁴ Fallen, Katie. “Qiu Xiaofei at Pace Gallery, New York.”

¹⁵ Fallen, Katie. “Qiu Xiaofei at Pace Gallery, New York.”

¹⁶ Fallen, Katie. “Qiu Xiaofei at Pace Gallery, New York.”

¹⁷ Fallen, Katie. “Qiu Xiaofei at Pace Gallery, New York.”

style within the piece references back to the contradictions that Xiaofei has experienced within the transitioning Chinese life and his own understanding of his personal identity.¹⁸ Identity, as seen through Xiaofei's work, is less of an already accomplished idea, and becomes more about the process of production.¹⁹ As the realities within the Chinese culture and society transforms, so does Xiaofei's style and approach to making. The process of creating then becomes that of discovering and rediscovering while understanding his past, present, and future.²⁰

¹⁸ "Qiu Xiaofei." Pace Gallery.

¹⁹ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora: in Jonathan Rutherford (editor), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990.

²⁰ Fallen, Katie. "Qiu Xiaofei at Pace Gallery, New York."

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proquest-com.proxy.lib.utc.edu/dissertations-theses/investment-potential-emerging-chinese/docview/1728065237/se-2?accountid=14767.

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