

PRESSBOOK

GAO Weigang

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Whitewall China Summer 2015 Karen Smith

Don't Cry — Gao Weigang

Text / Karen Smith

"I am still wondering if I should pursue something else instead."

—Gao Weigang

Gao Weigang describes himself as a serious person. It is not, however, a statement he wants you to take seriously. Still, the humour that underscores the way in which he expresses ideas is not obvious to anyone who has never met the artist. Since Gao can also be described as something of a recluse, the majority of people who encounter his work will never have met him. They are, thus, unwittingly blinkered to the very impulse that inspires it. That is the first of the many contradictions Gao brings to his work.

The question of serious / not is fundamental, for when you realize that he is quite the opposite everything about his art begins to make sense. But what sense is it that Gao Weigang strives for? It is at once everything and nothing. 'Everything' converges in the individual need to create and to express. This impulse makes sense of Gao's choice of art as a vehicle, as a career. What, in the world today, renders this need null – 'nothing' – is his sense of the futility of the efforts that artists make to arrive at anything unique in form or content. Gao finds further frustration in his creeping inability to believe in art as a meaningful engagement when it is the end result of an increasingly sophisticated production and distribution process managed and run by artists and their agents along the lines of exclusive boutiques. As if trying to make sense of this luxe phenomenon, Gao's works own a lustrous veneer of deceiving value; a luminous – often golden – surface. The visual metaphor here is perhaps clear to all; they are golden in tone because the value of artworks is now generally so efficiently monetised. We are aware, though, that it is unlikely any of the art objects Gao produces would be fashioned from real gold. Damien Hirst might have drawn dry the finite well of the world's pink diamonds to create an object of almost inestimable fiscal value but, ultimately, produced a piece of dubious artistic merit. That's one contradiction we all get.

For Gao Weigang, the allusion to gold is a joke about artistic license and in many respects his art works wear their artifice on their sleeves. Similar to a Cindy Sherman *Centerfold*, we are meant to see the joins, the falsification as the means by which the illusion is constructed; a deception so easily read in the example of Sherman, yet hard to grasp in Gao's works.

The reason is, perhaps, that of seduction: the perfect surfaces and aura of precision where even imperfections are there by design, like artfully placed beauty marks on a porcelain cheek. Confronting a cluster of his works is like encountering a room full of Miss Universe contestants. Your eyes are awash with visual treats—gold-plated aluminium (the *Superstructure* series), polished steel and stone, marble as proverbially soft to the touch as silk, paintings with deftly placed diamond highlights and pseudo-Islamic patterns of Rorschach symmetry (*Vice* series); stars glinting in painted skies (the *Struggler* series), and always a handsomely elegant form – elements that, like glossy hair, clear bright eyes, porcelain skin, hour-glass figures, affirm what you are looking at. It's art, right? Thus assured, you move on, largely unaware of the deeper idea embedded in each piece. Clues are discretely secreted in plain sight but being disguised as something other than what they seem are ever overshadowed by the glossy, smooth veneer.

In an era when so much art is apparently dying for attention, doing whatever it takes to win the viewers gaze, the critic's

praise, Gao's reticence is curious. That he is on to something is noted, and by art world notaries who are perhaps more readily conversant with the language of contradictions than the layman. A debut at the 2011 Hong Kong Art Fair saw Gao selected as the inaugural HK Art Futures prize winner by a jury led by super-curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist. *Don't Cry to Me* (2011) was atypical of an 'award-winning' art fair work: elegant, understated, and ambiguous. In the cacophony of passersby, it was a barely audible cry, the sound of what was presumed to be a young girl weeping that almost passed unheard amidst the general excitement. This was Gao's *Don't Cry to Me*, a sound installation housed in a two metre length of bamboo, with nothing else added. It was, is, the embodiment of the futility he perceives; and the humour – as measured in the title – with which he counters that.

Next to it, by coincidental placing rather than intended association, was *Intuition* (2011), a painting of a tiger skin on rice paper. To Gao, objects are each equivalent, chosen only for the means of interrupting convention that can be applied to their presence in a painting – although Gao is not a painter in the conventional sense, he has produced several series of works on canvas and board. The paintings are good examples of layering that characterises Gao's art: material upon material, texture upon texture; cloak upon meaning. *Struggler 3* is a typically unassuming composition, a finely executed depiction of a snow-covered mountain, its sober surface disturbed by a cascade of golden rivulets running down the centre. It might be a postmodern pictorial juxtaposition, a binary contrast between established tradition and newer conceptual deconstruction. The *Struggler* series echoes the *Pictus Interruptus* images of pioneering 20th century American photographer Ray K. Metzker (1931-2004) where objects in the foreground are included to intrude upon the visual convention of the picture frame. So the painted composition is meticulously completed, and then interrupted, the flow of form and conventional meaning alike.

The message could be more obvious: a visual clash of East meeting West, where the cascade suggests the waterfalls depicted in Chinese shanshui ink paintings; a trickle of Chinese 'water' having small affect on a Western landscape that will proliferate as the trickle gains in volume and momentum. Perhaps it simply speaks of global warming; the roseate golden glow indicates the environmental distress apparent in the world, a visual metaphor for the illusory beauty of progress. Illusory is key to understanding the contrasts and contradictions in Gao's work. He has a penchant for staircases, which he creates of a form that is modern, minimalist yet sturdy, and always lacking substance to function as a staircase ought. Literally, metaphorically, they are forms castrated, their meaning truncated; flows of energy going nowhere. As a contradiction, this is easy to see. This may take a little more effort to grasp, but while all that glitters in Gao's work may not be precious metal, in an ever more materialistic art world of art objects, the ideas that transact as art here are worth their weight in gold.

Gao Weigang

Born 1976, Jixi, Heilongjiang. Lives and works in Beijing