

## Painting Unsettled

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### Exhibition Location:

UCCA Edge  
2F, No. 88 Xizang Bei Lu  
Jing'an District, Shanghai  
China

### Media Contact:

Laura Xue  
Media Relations Manager  
+86 21 6628 6861  
+86 15010858162  
[bingyan.xue@ucca.org.cn](mailto:bingyan.xue@ucca.org.cn)

Press material available at  
[ucca.org.cn/en/press](https://ucca.org.cn/en/press)

UCCA Edge presents its first exhibition of 2023, “Painting Unsettled.” The group show features the work of eight Chinese-born artists, who draw upon mythology, vernacular culture, psychological explorations, and more to reinvigorate painting in the face of global uncertainty and technological change.

SHANGHAI, China —From March 11 to May 21, 2023, UCCA Edge presents the group exhibition “Painting Unsettled.” Bringing together eight artists from different generations and educational backgrounds, who work with different styles and techniques, the exhibition explores the possibilities offered by painting in the fractured information landscape of the present moment. Participating artists include Han Mengyun (b. 1989, Wuhan), Ce Jian (b. 1984, Shandong province), Li Ran (b. 1986, Hubei province), Yong Xiang Li (b. 1991, Changsha), Qiu Xiaofei (b. 1977, Harbin), Wang Xiaoqu (b. 1987, Guilin), Wang Zhibo (b. 1981, Zhejiang province), and Xie Nanxing (b. 1970, Chongqing). While the notion that photography would lead to painting’s obsolescence has long been disproven, new technologies and social changes are once again destabilizing the medium’s identity and questioning its relevance. In an age of parochial conservatism, incipient deglobalization, AI-generated art, and online echo bubbles, how is painting responding? “Painting Unsettled” presents viewers with an array of potential paths forward. Its artists stage interventions freely drawing upon different historical contexts and traditional techniques from around the world; engage with local contexts through the visual languages of modernity and contemporary life; and dive into their subconscious minds to depict hazy, half-remembered scenes. The exhibition is curated by UCCA Curator Luan Shixuan.

Although all the artists in “Painting Unsettled” were born in China, many of them have lived, studied, or shown extensively overseas, granting an international perspective to their practices. This is especially true for the three artists whose work opens the exhibition on UCCA Edge’s second floor, all of whom are currently based in Europe, and reference myths and traditions from different regions in their pieces. Visitors first encounter paintings inspired by industrial robots by Berlin-based artist Ce Jian. In contrast to the streamlined productivity

commonly associated with these mechanical appendages, Jian abstracts them into bulbous, seemingly living bodies, often bathed in yellow highlights and shaded with deep, dark purples. The titles and forms of multiple pieces refer to the half-human half-animal Sphinx and the nine-headed Hydra of Greek mythology. Juxtaposed against wallpaper, the most commercial of art forms, Jian's paintings at once celebrate hybridity and critique technology and marketization.

The next two artists, Berlin-based Yong Xiang Li and London-based Han Mengyun, both draw upon traditional non-Western art in their pieces, yet respond to the legacy of Orientalism in different ways. Li takes a parodic approach: painting on furniture; swapping artisan-crafted wood for industrial materials that imply contemporary life's constraints and gender roles; and, in *Joy Granter* (2019), imitating the appearance of a shrine while making its atmosphere more absurd than solemn. Han, on the other hand, highlights techniques and imagery from the art and handicrafts of South Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere, proposing a visual conversation in which European art history is still present, but not granted undue prominence. The diptych *Death and Folly* (2020), for example, depicts flower rubbings centered on a glass bead and skull, mixing symbols of impermanence from Western vanitas painting and Buddhist thangka painting. To borrow art historian David Joselit's phrasing, in the work of these artists, "painting is beside itself"—engaged with its own materiality but also enmeshed in a cross-cultural network of motifs, crafts, technologies, and images.

On the next floor, Li Ran and Wang Xiaoqu also bring fresh influences into contemporary painting, but focus more directly on Chinese identity. Li Ran's works take cues from satirical cartoons from 1930s Shanghai and Chinese theater set design from the 1950s onwards. His protagonists strike angular poses within moodily-lit, narrative-filled vignettes and appear to represent both the Chinese intellectuals of a century ago and their present day analogues, suggesting how reflecting on recent history might lead to insights about our own times. Wang also approaches contemporary life in a roundabout manner, taking images of everyday scenes (sometimes sourced online) and warping them into billowing forms that remain recognizable as humorous archetypes. For example, the figures in *Galloping Horses* (2023) capture the titular image (a symbol of masculinity in classical Chinese painting), while also evoking generic photos of

officials on a site visit. By combining traces of classical art with vernacular photography, Wang wittily brings contemporary China onto her canvases.

The tendency to drift between different temporalities, styles, and sources of imagery that is present in many of the aforementioned works is amplified even further by the three artists on the exhibition's final floor. Xie Nanxing contributes works from his latest series, "Exploiter of Dreams," in which indistinct forms emerge from behind overlapping color blocks, patterns, or even random blotches of paint. His compositions entice viewers by implying, yet never revealing, discernible symbols and narratives. Wang Zhibo's pieces are rooted the formal language of portraiture, yet also operate according to an absurdist, dream logic: in the self-portrait *Piggy, Homesickness and Toucan* (2020), the artist prematurely ages her face and it blends into a swooping line of yellow paint, while elsewhere human bodies boast animal heads. There is an airy, floating feel to Wang's paintings, as if the scenes she depicts are untethered from time or gravity, a quality complimented by their placement hanging in midair along a corridor. Finally, the exhibition closes with paintings by Qiu Xiaofei featuring houses isolated on snowy mountainsides and within bizarre forests, sometimes surrounded by potted plants more suited for a domestic setting. In the woods the cabins morph into human faces, or even an emaciated ribcage. Qiu experiments with materials—painting some works on salvaged wood, others on jute canvas—while his subject matter and titles allude to parallels between Chinese and Soviet history. Within these subconscious landscapes, personal memories and major historical events seep into each other, the boundaries between different spaces and times growing indistinct.

"Painting Unsettled" posits that painting's durability as a medium is precisely due to its ostensible instability—any new medium that threatens to replace it eventually becomes a new inspiration, shaping its style and subjects, if not necessarily the tools used to make it. As painting becomes a "meta-medium" capable of absorbing techniques from all others, its discourses have entered a new chapter, informed by a growing awareness of non-human subjectivities and intelligences. Gesturing towards these emerging concerns, the eight artists in "Painting Unsettled" mix traditions, high and low culture, and varied techniques and temporalities to break new ground.

### **Support and Sponsorship**

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### **Public Programs**

On each weekend during “Painting Unsettled,” UCCA Edge will present a series of enriching public programs, including five discussions with artists and scholars, three guided tours led by inspiring special guests, two workshops, and a screening of video art by participating artists. Additional special programs will be held throughout the exhibition period, covering topics including film culture and more. For the most up-to-date information on events, please refer to announcements on UCCA’s official website and UCCA Edge’s official accounts on WeChat and other social media platforms.

### **About UCCA Edge**

Opened in May 2021, UCCA Edge occupies 5,500 square meters over three levels of the new EDGE tower in Shanghai’s Jing’an District. Designed by New York- based architects SO – IL, the museum includes 1700 square meters of gallery space as well as a wraparound outdoor terrace and public spaces including a lobby and auditorium. As an integral part of the UCCA constellation, UCCA Edge mounts exhibitions of leading Chinese and international artists, some developed exclusively for the Shanghai audience, some touring from other UCCA locations. Situated just north of People’s Square and Suzhou Creek, and directly above the Qufu Lu station of the Shanghai Metro in a bustling revitalized neighborhood, UCCA Edge has already become an essential destination and an integral part of Shanghai’s vibrant cultural fabric.

[www.ucca.org.cn/en](http://www.ucca.org.cn/en)

### **About the Artists**

#### **Han Mengyun**

Han Mengyun (b. 1989, Wuhan) is a multimedia artist and bilingual writer currently based in London. She received her BA in Studio Art from Bard College in 2012 and pursued the study of Sanskrit at various institutions including Kyoto

University before completing her MFA at the University of Oxford in 2018, with a research focus on Classical Indology and Indian aesthetic theories. Through the study of multiple religions and global art history, Han is developing a highly transcultural and transhistorical visual language that is based on Western painting yet merges the formal characteristics of Buddhist manuscripts, Indian and Persian miniature paintings, and Chinese and Japanese block-printed books. She pays particular attention to the spatiality of religious architecture, which informs the configuration of her exhibition spaces and the placement of the paintings within. Often employing universal symbols and metaphors, she aims to create a poetic resonance as an instrument of critique.

Her recent exhibitions include “Night” (ISA Gallery, Shanghai, 2022); “The Glass Bead Game” (ShanghART Gallery booth, Art Basel, 2022); “Splinters of Jade” (A Thousand Plateaus Art Space, Chengdu, 2019); “In Between Islands” (Today Art Museum, Beijing, 2013). Recent group exhibitions include “Uli Sigg Collection” (SongEun Art Space, Seoul, 2023); “A Place for Concealment” (Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing, 2022); “The Dwelling Place of the Other in Me” (Power Station of Art, Shanghai, 2021); and the Diriyah Biennale (Saudi Arabia, 2021), which featured her project “The Pavilion of Three Mirrors” (2021), among others.

### **Ce Jian**

Ce Jian (b. 1984, Shandong province) moved to Germany in 1988 and currently lives and works in Berlin. She studied at the Berlin University of the Arts, where she graduated in 2008. Between 2006-2007, she studied at Goldsmiths College, London. She also earned a Magister Artium degree in Art History from the Humboldt University and Freie Universität Berlin in 2009 and received a PhD in Art and Visual History from the Humboldt University of Berlin in 2017. She taught at the Department of Art History, Graz University, Austria, from 2019 to 2020. Ce Jian’s works deal with pictorial traditions and visual concepts that have their origins in cultural and art history and extend into today’s digital image worlds. She is interested in questions of a technically transformed aesthetics and physicality, and discusses them through carefully composed paintings featuring an expressive palette and spontaneous gestures, which serve as a counterbalance to her practice’s conceptual framework.

Major solo and two-person exhibitions include “Paradise” (White Space, Beijing, 2021); “Words of Art” (Ce Jian & Yuzheng Cheng, Yell Space, Shanghai, 2019);

“Armada” (White Space, Beijing, 2018); “On Paper 2” (Zapbeijing, Beijing, 2018); “Bannermen” (Gallery SU, Seoul, 2018); “Transeuropa” (Ce Jian & Yuzheng Cheng, Whiteconcepts, Berlin, 2017); “CAPTCHA” (Galerie Philine Cremer, Dusseldorf, 2017); “The Grand Illusion” (White Space, Beijing, 2016); and “Elephant” (NON Berlin, 2016). Recent group exhibitions include: “Persona and Parasite” (White Space, Beijing, 2022); “The Hearing Trumpet: Part 1” (Galerie Marguo, Paris, 2022); “Sonderlage” (Lage Egal, Berlin, 2021); “El Lissitzky’s Rooms” (Surplus Space, Wuhan, 2020); “A World in a Grain of Sand” (Fosun Foundation Collection, Sanya, China, 2018); “Art Patrons” (Qiao Space, Shanghai, 2018); and “The Second Self” (Peres Projects, Berlin, 2017), among others.

### **Li Ran**

Li Ran (b. 1986, Hubei province) currently lives and works in Shanghai. In 2009 he graduated from the Oil Painting Department of Sichuan Fine Arts Institute with a BFA. Li Ran’s practice ranges across multiple media, from video, performance, and painting, to installation and writing, using techniques such as mimicry, repetition, and satire to blur the boundaries between reality and fiction. In recent years, he has been researching the treatment of antagonist roles in Chinese theater, stage art, make-up design, dubbed foreign films, and locally-produced spy films from the 1950s onwards. Based on archival photos, character scenes, and dubbed monologues, Li develops subjective and personalized narratives and expands upon themes including politics, ideology, and performativity, as well as notions of time and space, through his writing painting, sound, and installation.

Li Ran’s single-channel video work has screened at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), London and The Jewish Museum, New York. He won “Best Artist Award” at the Moscow International Biennale for Young Art in 2014 and was nominated for the “Future Generation Prize” by the PinchukArtsCentre (Kyiv) in 2017. His major solo exhibitions include: “Beyond Silence” (Lisson Gallery, New York, 2022); “Out of Reach” (Christian Andersen Gallery, Copenhagen, 2021); “Who Are You” (AIKE, Shanghai, 2019); and “Life of the Pilgrim” (ShanghArt Gallery, Beijing, 2017), among others. Notable group exhibitions include: “Minimalism-Maximalism-Mechanism Act 1–Act 2” (Art Sonje Center, Seoul, 2022); “ON | OFF 2021: Carousel of Progress” (He Art Museum, Foshan, China, 2022); “The Infallible Interior: The Third Tour of the Exhibition ‘Notes for Tomorrow’” (Sifang Art Museum, Nanjing, 2021); “Free Prism-Video Wave” (OCAT Shanghai, 2021); “An Impulse to Turn” (Inside-Out Art

Museum, Beijing, 2020); “HOW NOW: The Life App” (HOW Museum, Shanghai, 2019); “Cold Nights” (UCCA Beijing, 2017); and “Museum ON/OFF” (Galerie O-Espace Prospectif at Center Pompidou, Paris, 2016-2017), among others.

### **Yong Xiang Li**

Yong Xiang Li (b. 1991, Changsha) is a Berlin-based artist. In 2020, Li completed his Meisterschüler at the Städelschule, Frankfurt, and was nominated for the eighth Huayu Youth Award. In his practice, Li Yongxiang draws on a variety of different media. His main interest lies in multidisciplinary intersections between painting, sculpture, music, and video. Influenced by a reciprocal understanding of culture and diaspora experience, the artist challenges ideas of sovereignty and existing power structures by engaging in contaminations that take aim at media and formal and cultural specificities.

His major solo exhibitions include: “8 Chairs (Adolescent Fabrications)” (Antenna Space booth, Paris+ par Art Basel, Paris, 2022); “Inside Job” (LC Queisser, Tbilisi, 2022); “Late” (Futura, Prague, 2021); “Superfluous” (Schwabinggrad, Munich, 2021); “Curl” (Galerie Emanuel Layr, Vienna, 2020); and “Companion” (Jean Claude Maier, Frankfurt, 2019), among others. Group exhibitions include: “Identity Not Proved: New Acquisitions of the Federal Collection” (Bundeskunsthalle, Bonn, 2022); “The View from There” (Sadie Coles, London, 2021); “Indistinct Chatter” (Layr, Vienna, 2021); and “The Eighth Huayu Award Finalist Exhibition 2020: A Long Hello” (UCCA Beijing, 2020), among others.

### **Qiu Xiaofei**

Qiu Xiaofei (b. 1977, Harbin) currently lives and works in Beijing. Taking memory as a starting point, Qiu’s work blends history, politics, and personal experience in a dreamy, brilliant color palette, constantly exploring the improvisation and instability of the painting process and finding a tense balance within mixed and rich imagery. His recent solo exhibitions include: “Divination” (Pace Gallery, New York, 2021); “Qiu Xiaofei: An Artist’s Case Study Exhibition” (New Century Art Foundation, Beijing, 2020); “Double Pendulum” (Pace Gallery, New York, 2016); “Apollo Bangs Dionysus” (Pace Beijing, 2014); “Repetition” (Minsheng Art Museum, Shanghai, 2013); and “Heilongjiang Box” (CAFA Art Museum, Beijing, 2006), among others. His major group exhibitions include: “ON/OFF: China’s Young Artists in Concept and Practice” (UCCA Beijing, 2013); “MengLong - Oscurità: Collateral Event of the 54th Venice Biennale” (2011); the 10th Havana

Biennial (2009); and “The Real Thing” (Tate Liverpool, 2007), among others.

### **Wang Xiaoqu**

Wang Xiaoqu (b. 1987, Guilin) currently lives and works in Beijing. In 2014 she graduated from the Oil Painting Department of Sichuan Fine Arts Institute with a MA. Wang’s work is closely related to portrait painting, and focuses on the subtleties of people’s mental states and personalities, reinforcing a sense of absurdity through exaggerated variations and overwhelming compositions. In her paintings Wang projects collective dreams along with social consciousness and order. Figures in her works are bathed in a mixture of politics, culture, and everything in between. Her major solo exhibitions include: “Welcome” (SSSTART, Shanghai, 2021) and “Open Stone Gate” (AIKE, Shanghai, 2021). Her major group exhibitions include: “Huayu Youth Award Finalist Exhibition: The Perfect Flaw” (Huayu Art Center, Sanya, China, 2021); “Let Painting Talk” (Taikang Space, Beijing, 2021); “Shadow Lover” (OCAAT Xi’an, 2021); “Golden Flow” (CHAO Art Center, Beijing, 2020); “Loading” (Garry Culture Center, Art Power 100, Beijing, 2020); “How Do We Begin?” (X Museum, Beijing, 2020); and “Land of the Lustrous” (UCCA Dune, Qinhuangdao, China, 2019), among others.

### **Wang Zhibo**

Wang Zhibo (b. 1981, Zhejiang province) currently lives and works in Hangzhou and Berlin. In her practice, Wang attempts to stretch, condense, and distort the dimensions and complexity of time and space through painting. Wang challenges the possibilities of these concepts not only within two-dimensional space, but also through the viewer’s perception of and participation in specific works. Her major solo exhibitions include: “Actor: Talking, Imitating, Teasing and Singing” (Gallery Weekend Beijing, 2021); “He No Longer Looks Human” (Edouard Malingue Gallery, Shanghai, 2018); “There is a place with four suns in the sky – red, white, blue and yellow” (Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong, 2016); “Standing Wave” (Armory Show, New York, 2013), among others. Her group exhibitions include: “About Painting” (Galerie Rolando Anselmi, Rome, 2021); “Hot/Cold – Dry/Wet: On Art and Latitude” (art+château, Bern, 2021); Frieze London 2020 (Online); “Neither Black/Red/Yellow nor Woman” (Times Art Center, Berlin, 2019); “Sans Soleil” (Edouard Malingue Gallery, Shanghai, 2019); “Nanking Winter College II” (Art Museum of Nanjing University of the Arts, 2018); “South” (Wu Space, Shenyang, 2018); and “Pan Yuliang: A Journey to Silence” (Times Museum, Guangzhou, and Villa Vassilief, Paris, 2017), among others.



### **Xie Nanxing**

Xie Nanxing (b. 1970, Chongqing) currently lives and works in Beijing. Xie is a revolutionary, experimental painter, who always challenges tradition and the seemingly established rules of art education. His major solo exhibitions include: “Adverb High Command” (Petzel Gallery, New York, 2022); “A Roll of the Dice” (Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing, 2020); “A Gift Like Kung Pao Chicken” (Thomas Dane Gallery, London, 2019); “Xie Nanxing: Spices” (UCCA Beijing, 2018); “Untitled 3 x” (Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing, 2015); “THE SECOND WHIP WITH A BRUSH” (Galerie Urs Meile, Lucerne, 2013). Notable group exhibitions include: “A Place for Concealment” (Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing, 2022); “SNAPSHOT” (Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing, 2021); “Italian Renaissance Drawings: A Dialogue with China” (M Woods 798, Beijing, 2021); “Psychic Wounds: On Art & Trauma” (The Warehouse Dallas, 2020); “Chinese Whispers” (MAK Museum für Angewandte Kunst, Vienna, 2019); Documenta XII (Kassel, 2007); and the 48th Venice Biennale, among others.