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REASONING WITH IDOLS WANG GUANGYI



Frozen Northern Wastelands, 1985, oil on canvas, 150 × 100 cm. Collection of the artist.

FEATURES BY ANDREW COHEN FROM MAR/APR 2012

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Weather Report, 1989, oil on canvas, 150 × 120 cm. Private collection. Courtesy the artist.

Wang Guangyi is one of the most recognizable figures on today's contemporary art stage, globally renowned for his combination of avant-garde art and impressive commercial success. This contrast should come as no surprise, as he encourages the recognition of such contradictions. Wang's art embraces seemingly antithetical elements—Pop with Tao, communism with capitalism, Christ with Mao—in order to transcend differences and “rationally” analyze their interrelations. Nowadays, Wang enjoys rock-star status, with all the expected fanfare, material wealth and comforts. He looks the part too: long hair, scruffy beard, a leather jacket and a ubiquitous cigar in his mouth. He was, however, born into extreme poverty and a turbulent totalitarian society in 1957, which makes his creative path to success all the more extraordinary.

Wang's parents played a key role in his escape into exotic and mystical worlds. His father worked on the railroad, which allowed the young Wang to traverse distant landscapes, viewing them from the romantic perspective of a train window. “The railway is a symbol of distance to me,” Wang says. “As a child I would often take a train with my father to strange lands; this made me very curious.” At home his imagination was just as inspired by his mother's “window flowers” (*chuang hua*), paper-cuts that decorated the panes of their simple home in China's northeastern “ice city” of Harbin. The sunlight filtering through the kaleidoscopic designs helped shape how he viewed his mundane surroundings.

In his Beijing studio, Wang pauses to light an impressive Cuban cigar, its blue smoke billowing slowly upward as he collects his thoughts. When he was about ten years old, inspired by his mother's craft, he attempted his first artwork in the form of ink

drawings on glass. He would carry the glass to a corner of the house and shine a flashlight through it, casting shadows on the wall. "During my childhood I grew up under the sunshine of Mao," he says. "The Cultural Revolution [1966–76] started when I was in elementary school, so I didn't really understand what was happening. But I remember seeing a lot of posters with big heads. This interested me very much. At home, I started to paint Mao's head." When Wang was old enough to understand what was happening around him, he too became a fervent believer in the myth of his generation. "By the time I became a Red Guard, Mao was my idol."

In the early 1970s, Wang worked as a painter of propaganda posters, adding political slogans to his Revolutionary Realist depictions of workers, farmers and soldiers; and by the time of Mao's death, in 1976, he knew his calling was to be an artist. However, Wang's dream of becoming an official artist was continually thwarted by the very system he yearned to be accepted by: having been closed during the Cultural Revolution decade, the newly reopened art academies rejected Wang's application three times between 1977 and 1980. "I felt it was the end of the world," he remembers. "Becoming an artist was the only thing I wanted to do; it was my only hope—so I persevered."

It was during this period of liberalization, often referred to as the "Beijing Spring," that foreign literature and art started to filter through China's opening door. Like many of his generation, Wang embarked on a passionate pursuit of self-education, reading such foreign thinkers as Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche, among others. On a deeply personal level, Wang related to Martin Eden, the main character in Jack London's novel of the same name. Like Wang, the Eden character came from a working-class background, was self-educated and struggled against a series of rejections before finally succeeding as an artist—in Eden's case, as a writer. Eden denounced socialism as a "slave morality" and championed Nietzsche's idea of individualism. "Martin Eden was my encouragement as a young man," Wang says. "Back then I believed you had to work very hard to succeed." Wang's persistence eventually paid off: in 1980, he received a large envelope from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, bulging with application forms. "The moment I saw how thick it was, I knew I was in," he says. "It was the happiest moment of my life. Even to this day, I cannot describe this kind of joy—it was what I most wanted."

At the academy he learned to paint in a Soviet-style Realism, which disappointed him, as he was more interested in classical European art. After graduating, he began teaching but didn't like the intensely conservative education system. Outside the academies, some artists were starting to experiment with new styles; so after one year, he abandoned teaching and went south to Zhuhai, near the Macau border, to become a professional, full-time artist.

In 1984 he moved back to Harbin, and there joined Shu Qun, Ren Jian and Liu Yan to form the Northern Art Group. "The weather is cold up north, it's more mysterious, and this affected our theory and work," Wang says. "The theory was rational (*lixing*), and we used cool tones and colors." It emphasized cool, rational analysis, which became a sort of mantra for Wang, and may have been a reaction to his growing up during the feverish times of the Cultural Revolution. The group's art was focused on northern Chinese culture, yet it was also influenced by Wang's earlier readings of German philosophers. In a 1989 interview with Hu Lizhan, Wang said of his lofty metaphysical stance: "In 1985/86, I thought art possessed a social imperative, that it might lead man—this most advanced of creatures—to restore his sullied faith, allowing him to leave behind the sick morass of modern culture, with resolute belief in sublime reason and the greatness of his spirit."

In his 1985 painting, *Frozen Northern Wastelands*, Wang abstracts his human subjects into two amorphous and peak-like figures. Faceless, phallic and frigid, stripped of individuality, they sit on blocks of ice, staring out into the vast blue-white void. Lacking communication or interaction, time seems to have frozen, depicting the icy relation between humanity and the natural world, or between faithless individuals and a totalitarian state. The surreal shapes of barren snowdrifts, coupled with the cool-gray and blue-white tones that cast abstract shadows, combine to create a glacial psychological landscape intimately linked to his hometown, Harbin. “It’s cold, it’s lonely, it’s unpredictable,” Wang says of the harsh climate.

In a 1985 issue of *Fine Art in China* (*Zhongguo Meishu Bao*), Wang wrote: “The ‘Frozen Northern Wasteland’ series is not just a painting effort, it is a laudatory declaration of our ideological and cultural condition. When humans have suffered the philosophical paradoxes of life, they are left with the residual hopes of rebuilding an existential harmony.” In stark contrast to the Revolutionary Realist “red, bright and shining” workers, farmers and soldiers that he painted as a young Red Guard, by 1985 Wang had distilled Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, or “Superman,” into icy, abstract, alien beings.

However, the following year Wang moved on from his native northern subject matter, embarking on what he refers to as his second stage: the “Post-Classical” series (1986–88). Religion, which was nonexistent in Wang’s wasteland, now becomes a central theme. He spent the next four years researching classical European art, appropriating and revising iconic paintings from the Western canon. “I came to realize that the essence of art is its ancestry, its history,” he told Hu. “I thought art’s foundation and creation were intricately interwoven, that art does not come from some blank slate. From start to finish, when creating a work of art, one’s head is full of these historical considerations; an encounter with what has been and its entry into the process of rectification.”

Wang’s reading of art historian EH Gombrich’s “schema correction” theory heavily influenced him, yet as stated in a 1992 artist’s statement, he expressed a different understanding of this law concerning the way images develop over time. In his book *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (1960), Gombrich wrote: “You must have a starting point, a standard of comparison, in order to begin that process of making and matching and remaking which finally becomes embodied in the finished image. The artist cannot start from scratch, but he can criticize his forerunners.” Wang turned the theory on itself: he “corrected” and synthesized it into his own artwork, appropriating and rectifying iconic images into a new visual language.

In his *Post-Classical: Death of Marat* (1986), Wang created his own version of the famous neoclassical work by Jacques-Louis David, painted in 1793. Though he again uses similar featureless figures from his *Northern Wasteland*, the “schema” (in Gombrich’s terms) is no longer northern China, but a historic Western image, which itself is based on an actual event: the assassination of the French journalist and revolutionary Jean-Paul Marat. Wang’s correction, or revision of the original—a twin-planned abstraction, devoid of details and drained of color—reinterprets the inherited, canonical schema with a contemporary voice. His duplication of the empty figure adds an existential pop motif, which he employs in other works of this series.



Post Classic: Death of Marat, 1986, oil on canvas, 166 × 116 cm. Private collection. Courtesy the artist.



Red Rationality: Revision of the Idols, 1987, oil on canvas, 200 × 160 cm. Collection of the artist.

In his revised *Marat*, Wang explores the theme of revolution via French history. The minor aristocrat Charlotte Corday fatally stabbed Marat, making him into a martyr who was quickly canonized in art history; at the time, Marat's image often replaced depictions of Christ crucified. In his version, Wang transforms the ideal of sacrifice of life and freedom for a belief into an antiheroic and amorphous double-figure. The emotion with which David imbued the original image has been intentionally removed by Wang, allowing for a rational analysis of the theme.

Wang's next paintings would explore the theme of martyrdom in its most popular Western incarnation. By 1987, he had become particularly interested in Renaissance works with religious subjects. Wang drew parallels between the intellectual transformation that had occurred from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance (leading to the reform of Christianity and the beginning of the modern era) with China's transformation from the Cultural Revolution through the Beijing Spring, which opened the door of Maoism. At this time, ideas arrested since Mao's 1942 "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art," when the Chairman laid down the dogmatic foundations for Revolutionary Realism, were being released. In his 1986 essay, "We—Participants of the '85 Art Movement," Wang wrote: "The importance of Renaissance art lies in its discovery and awakening of human nature, while the '85 Art Movement is grounded in the context of modern civilization and is intent on elevating humankind's sublimity and health."

In his "Black and Red Rationality" series, Wang then applied his correction theory directly to Renaissance idols. In *Red Rationality: Revision of the Idols* (1987), Wang reinterprets Michelangelo's *Pietà* (c. late 15th century), transforming a sculpture into a painting. The abstract and amorphous figures from the frozen wasteland reappear once again, replacing the dead Christ and the Virgin Mother who holds him. The classic, tragic image of Mary grieving for Christ is stripped of emotion by using featureless figures. "In my view," Wang says, "emotion is tendentious. I take human emotion out of my paintings in order to keep my neutral position." By rerouting the preconceived emotions and impact of the Christian schema, Wang provides an alternative, contemporary view on inherited visual culture.

While many art historians have compared the formal elements of *Death of Marat* and the *Pietà*, Wang says he never thought of their structural similarities; he simply gravitated towards the two works instinctively and intuitively. He chose to paint these two dead historic figures because he saw them as representative of "humanity's destiny." Nonetheless, Wang's work raises the question of whether the canonization of iconic depictions of Western martyrs is so different from the reification of revolutionary heroes in China.



Sketch for Mao Zedong: AO, 1988, composite materials, 80 × 120 cm. Collection of the artist.

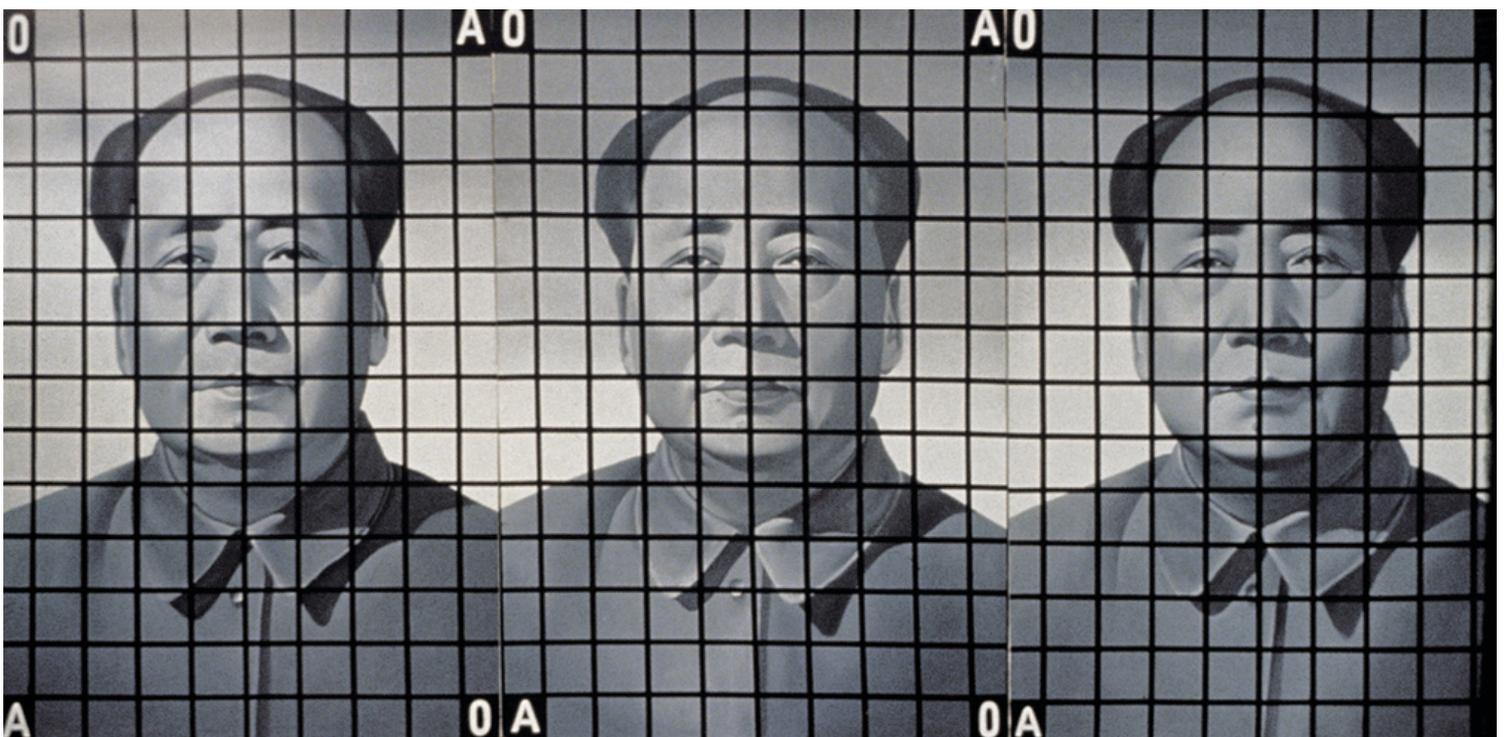
Aren't both genres forms of propaganda? "Of course," Wang replies.

An important new element appears in *Revision of the Idols*, Wang's grid of rationality. It is interesting to compare this new motif to another Renaissance source, Albrecht Dürer's woodcut, *Artist Drawing a Nude with Perspective Device* (1525). In Dürer's well-known image, the nude lies behind an artist's grid, used to isolate sections of a subject to ensure the accuracy of proportions. Yet, here the grid also acts as a symbolically rational or objective screen, distancing the artist from the sensuality of the voluptuous model. Wang would superimpose variations of such a grid on the post-classical Western idols of his next series.

It was at this stage, which he considers his third, that Wang turned back to appropriate a similarly iconic image from his own cultural experience: the standard portrait of Mao Zedong. This omnipresent image was part of every Chinese person's daily life, appearing in schools, factories, meeting halls, government buildings and homes. For Wang, the image was imbued with the same intense religiosity and devotion as that of Christ: "One is the idol of Christianity, the other is the idol of [Chinese] communism," he says.

Whereas Wang knew Christ through books and art, his knowledge of Mao was more personal. Instead of refiguring Mao into one of his abstract characters from his "Wasteland" and "Post-Classical" series, Wang chose to paint a more detailed, realistic portrait. Wang revised the historical Mao schema—itsself a corrected, composite image, a version of which still presides over Tiananmen Square—yet he retained his cool-gray palette and symbolic grid.

For *Mao Zedong AO* (1988), Wang applied his rational grid onto a triple portrait of the Chairman, displaying an affinity with Pop appropriation and repetition. As Dürer had done, buffering himself from the nude, with the grid Wang tried to distance himself, and the viewer, from Mao as a seductive figure of adoration. Yet Wang admits he did not totally succeed in removing emotion, as he did in his "Post-Classical" and "Red and Black Rationality" series. His painting actually seems to add a deeper, awe-inspiring aura to Mao's image, perhaps because he employed the standard portrait's style of realism, or due to its sheer size—an imposing 3.5 meters in width.

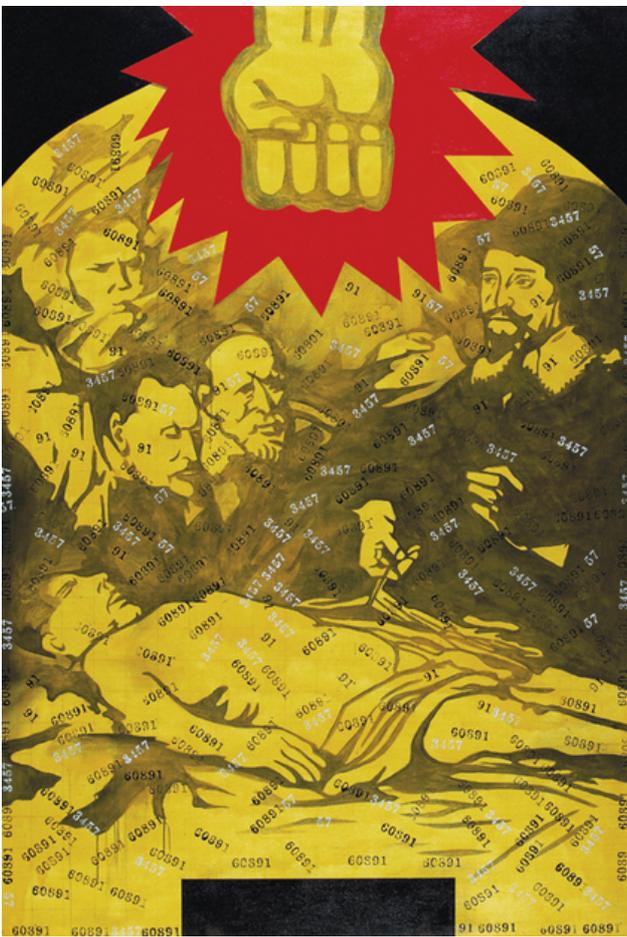


Mao Zedong AO was the first work in Wang's new Mao series. The schematic study for this work was a store-bought, embroidered portrait, because, as Wang says, "Posters are paper, and fragile. Embroidery is on cloth, a textile. It'll survive long term." Wang likens this prefabricated portrait of Mao to Marcel Duchamp's infamous use of a readymade urinal; and in a gesture similar to the dada artist inking a mustache and "L.H.O.O.Q." on a postcard of the *Mona Lisa*, Wang applied his hallmark grid and the letters "AO" in black paint onto what was, after all, just another image of Mao.

The critical choice of appropriating and revising Social Realism—the Chinese schema for over 30 years at that time—was a huge shift stylistically for Wang, and one of radical, historical importance for Chinese art. By using and "correcting" its most iconic image, Wang turned the language of Social Realism on itself in order to offer a fresh contemporary perspective. Done in triplicate, painted in tones of gray—"to make it feel like it's historical"—Wang introduced symbolically objective layers, trying to neutralize the fervent worship attached to Mao's cult of personality. The artist also claims no inherent meaning to the letters A and O. "It's easy to write, and it looks good on the painting," he says. Asked if there's any subconscious relation to the last two letters in Mao's name, he adds, "At the beginning, I didn't think so. But maybe implicitly, it could be . . . I used English letters because it had more universal appeal. As I made the triptych for the 1989 exhibition ["China/Avant-Garde"], I knew English would leave a greater impression on the international audience."

The "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition opened in February 1989, and was famously closed by the authorities within hours, after artist Xiao Lu dramatically fired a gun at her and her boyfriend Tang Song's installation of a pair of phone booths, declaring the work "dead." Wang's Mao triptych drew almost as much attention. Before the show reopened a couple of days later, authorities obliged Wang to modify the work (forcing him, ironically, to correct his correction). "They didn't care what I changed," he recalls, "but it had to be something, so I made the simplest change. With one line of paint through the right side of the O, I changed it into a C, and they seemed satisfied." He adds, "The government controlled everything; they just wanted to show their power." But Wang still had the last word: the official title of the work remains *Mao Zedong AO* to this day.

Though he saw reproductions of Andy Warhol's work in his third year at university, and liked how "Warhol made very common things noble," Wang claims the inspiration for his triptych came from Taoist thought. "Laozi said that one produces two, two produces three, three produces the whole world. My Mao was influenced by this philosophy." In an article about the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition for the Party mouthpiece, the *People's Daily*, a perplexed critic wrote of *Mao Zedong AO*: "Maybe the grid is a kind of barrier. For so many years we said that Mao Zedong was our most intimate relative, or something like that; so close to us. Maybe this barrier is to separate us from him . . . Why paint three paintings? This makes one feel that the traces of this formerly noble personality can now be found everywhere." Though many Western critics have interpreted the grid as a jail cell, writing that Wang placed Mao behind bars, the artist says this is a misunderstanding of his intention. "I used the grid because in Chinese culture there is the *jiugongge* box to make things bigger or smaller," he says, referring to a nine-square grid, commonly used as a guide to proportions when learning calligraphy. "Mao was idolized by the people as in a fairy tale. I was trying to make this icon into a normal person; trying to scale him down to normality."



Rembrandt criticized!, 1990, oil on canvas, 200 × 300 cm. Private collection. Courtesy the artist.

In his now-famous 1992 essay “Apathy and Deconstruction in Post-’89 Art,” critic Li Xianting wrote: “The 1989 ‘China/Avant-Garde’ exhibition lowered the curtain on the 1980’s contemporary art movement. In fact, initial inklings of the ‘Post-’89’ phenomenon had appeared in the ‘China/Avant-Garde’ exhibition. First, as a precursor to Political Pop, Wang Guangyi, one of the most representative artists of 1980’s contemporary art, showed his work *Mao Zedong AO*. Since 1989, without coordination, some leading artists from the ’85 New Wave [art movement] have one after another abandoned their metaphysical stance and headed toward Pop art. Because the majority of their works deconstruct the most influential personages and political events in China in a humorous way, I call them ‘Political Pop.’”

Like many artists at the time, after the experience of “China/Avant-Garde” and the tragic crackdown of the Tiananmen Square student movement only months later, Wang put aside his formerly lofty aesthetics to reflect more deeply on his artistic path. “I resolved that art must be passionate towards reality,” he wrote in his 1992 artist statement, “and that only this enthusiasm can develop academic issues in terms of society, history and reality.” These sentiments would later translate into his “Great Criticism” series, begun in 1990, which became his first international commercial success.

In one of his first works in the series, *Rembrandt Criticized!* (1990), Wang appropriates Rembrandt’s *Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* (1632), adding to it a Revolutionary Realist style fist, surrounded by a red sun. Instead of a grid, Wang has added bar codes—similar to those found on the ever more numerous consumer items for sale in China at the time. In a new dialectical synthesis, Wang submits the old Western master to Chinese revolutionary “criticism and struggle” (*pidou*), represented by the rattling fist. However, Wang’s next works in the series immediately return to the propaganda images of his own past, which he knew intimately as a Red Guard poster painter. By combining depictions of workers with logos of famous commercial brands, such as Coca-Cola and Rolex (“corrections” of the political slogans he had painted as a youth), Wang synthesized the schematic propaganda of two seemingly opposed systems. He shows that the terms of a contradiction can complete each other. It was a prescient synthesis, among the first depictions of how communism and capitalism have come together and thrived, to be virtually interchangeable.

Today, Wang has three studios in Beijing. In one, the size of an airplane hangar, he is preparing new paintings that he hopes censors will allow him to include in his solo retrospective at Beijing’s private Today Museum, opening later this year. In a telling statement of how little some things have changed since 1989, the Ministry of Culture has officially prohibited Wang from including *Mao Zedong AO* in the exhibition. Standing in front of his latest works, he talks of the hold Mao still has on him and his art. Behind him loom two six-meter-long paintings, one of the late Chairman lying in state, titled *Death of Guides* (2011), and another of Christ lying dead after his crucifixion, *Grief Over Christ* (2011). “When such a figure has so strong an influence during your childhood, it’s very difficult to erase that,” Wang says. “Even though I see him rationally today, I still have this strong image inside me. Everyone needs something to believe in. For me Mao was my belief. To me Mao was like Christ was for Christians. Christ cannot be doubted; and Mao, you had to believe him.”

Wang is now using rich strokes that drip into abstract patterns reminiscent of traditional Chinese ink-and-wash landscapes. His 16-meter-long *The Last Supper* (2012), a version of the Da Vinci masterpiece, contains such hidden vistas, in a new synthesis of Eastern and Western classical traditions. What happened to the grid? “When I was younger . . . I was really into this rational theory,” Wang says. “Growing older, I started to realize that you



Wang Guangyi in his Beijing studio speaking with Andrew Cohen in front of recent works including "The Last Supper," 2011. Stills from video shot by Julien Roby.

cannot be rational about everything; there may be some mysterious things that you cannot grasp rationally but can still appreciate. Now I'm interested in mysterious subjects. And Mao still represents this mystery."

Taking a moment to light a new cigar, he adds, "Today, there is no great idol in Chinese culture."

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