

Article

From Material Resistance to Signification: The Logic of Meaning-Making in Contemporary Chinese Comprehensive Material Painting

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Abstract

Research on contemporary Chinese comprehensive material painting has long focused on aesthetic qualities or relied on Western modernist frameworks, leaving the mechanism of material-to-symbol transformation under-theorized. This study investigates the generative logic of material meaning through a qualitative cross-case analysis of forty-eight works by twelve Chinese artists, integrating in-depth interviews and visual analysis. Through systematic analysis of images, material operations, and artists' interpretations, the study proposes a three-stage semiotic mechanism: anchoring, exemplification, and differentiation. Findings demonstrate that material meaning is formed through continuous negotiation between bodily technique and material resistance, mediated by cultural techniques guided by pre-textual schemata. Material attributes are first filtered and anchored, reinforced through embodied operations, and eventually stabilized into stylistic structures articulating cultural identity. This research argues that Chinese comprehensive material painting constitutes a localized mode of cross-cultural symbolic production rooted in indigenous cultural experience and material praxis. Ultimately, it supplies a mechanism-based interpretive framework for this art form while contributing a localized perspective to global discussions on the relationship among subjectivity, materiality, and cultural identity.

Keywords: comprehensive material painting; cultural techniques; materiality; exemplification; semiotic mechanism; cultural identity

1. Introduction

Within the context of contemporary Chinese art, the evolution of comprehensive material painting has been driven by the deep integration of multi-media experimentation and conceptual expression (Hu 2022). This development has produced forms of visual representation that challenge established artistic classifications and formalist interpretations. At its core lies a material practice of “integration” that, at the ontological level, breaks the long-standing binary opposition between traditional Chinese painting and oil painting that has dominated artistic discourse since the twentieth century. In doing so, it reshapes historically derived aesthetic boundaries, such as those between content and form, or figuration and abstraction (Kong 2017).

With the growing awareness of media consciousness, the language of painting has shifted from a technical expansion of media to the construction of mechanisms for the production of meaning (Hu 2021). Materials are no longer treated as purely physical carriers; they have been activated as media capable of conveying cultural memory, historical



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experience, and symbolic metaphor (Peng 2024). From a semiotic perspective, painting can be understood as a system of signs (Feshchenko 2023), within which materials become encoded through specific sequences of manipulation and organization. While recent scholarship aligns with this shift by recognizing the inherent value of materials, the specific operational pathways through which materials transition into localized symbolic structures remain obscured. This study addresses this problem by investigating how these relationships are formed through concrete artistic practice, revealing the underlying logic that transforms raw matter into cultural symbols.

Since the 1980s, Chinese artists have reconfigured their relationship with materials, a development that has attracted sustained scholarly attention. Studies of materiality frequently emphasize the agency and intrinsic value of materials. Cacchione and Lin (2021), for example, proposed the concept of “material art,” highlighting both the agency of materials and their historical resonance. Wiseman (2020) linked this development to philosophical discussions of new materialism, suggesting that Eastern aesthetics might illuminate a perceived symbiosis between matter and spirit. Y. Chen (2024) introduced the notion of “performative materiality,” arguing that materials function as dynamic entities intertwined with human action.

Yet, in the context of contemporary Chinese practice, an overemphasis on non-human agency risks obscuring a distinctive indigenous aesthetic: a state of dynamic equilibrium where subject and object permeate one another (Man 2012). Rooted in indigenous modes of perception, this perspective implies a pathway of artistic engagement with materials that differs fundamentally from Western experience. However, this path remains underexplored.

From the perspective of traditional transformation, current research focuses on the modern reconstruction of indigenous cultural resources. This movement deeply resonates with the broader discourse on “Re-Sinicization” (Shi 2008) and “Cultural Self-awareness” (Xing, 2010), reflecting a collective effort among contemporary Chinese artists to reclaim their cultural subjectivity by returning to native contexts in the face of globalization. Scholars have explored the translation of traditional allegories (Tang 2019), the re-interpretation of classical systems (Hu 2018), and the modernization of ancestral material techniques (Liu et al. 2024). Yet, while these studies affirm the role of material practice in preserving cultural continuity, they often treat cultural identity as a ready-made label. In doing so, they leave a critical gap: they bypass the intricate process through which raw matter is actually transformed into a meaningful cultural symbol.

Cultural identity is increasingly understood as a collective identification constructed through shared systems of symbols (G.-M. Chen 2017). This suggests that identity formation depends fundamentally on the reshaping of relationships between subjects and material objects within concrete practices. In Chinese comprehensive material painting, this restructuring takes the form of an aesthetic ethic of coexistence and reciprocity (S. Wu 2021). Within this local framework, material properties and artistic intervention remain in continuous negotiation. Rather than imposing external meaning onto passive matter, the artist selectively activates and responds to material qualities through embodied techniques, thereby transforming raw substrates into culturally recognizable symbolic structures. Rather than imposing external meaning onto passive matter, the artist selectively activates and responds to material qualities through embodied techniques, thereby transforming raw substrates into culturally recognizable symbolic structures.

In the global context, scholarly attention has also expanded beyond aesthetic concerns to the domains of cultural strategy and identity formation. Researchers have noted the “resistant nature” of comprehensive material painting. This resistance often manifests as a pragmatic strategy within global exhibition systems that seeks to dissolve rigid forms of nationalism. Through material practice, artists challenge fixed national labels and construct

a fluid, non-essentialist form of “Chineseness” (Davidson 2016). Within this framework, the contemporary activation of traditional material media is understood as a strategy for producing local meaning. By loosening the dominance of a single narrative of modernity, such practices help recalibrate Western-centered art histories and reposition Chinese art within global cultural structures (Clarke 2019). Zhang and Burapajana (2022) further argue that this material mode of signification revitalizes and reconstructs the spiritual dimensions of Chinese tradition.

While these studies provide diverse perspectives on the material turn in Chinese art, they also reveal significant theoretical tensions. These tensions arise not only from conceptual misalignments but also from the absence of mechanism-oriented analysis. Comprehensive material painting¹ emphasizes the integration of material expression within the pictorial system while maintaining continuity with Chinese artistic traditions. This differs fundamentally from the Western logic of mixed media (Hu 2014). Existing studies often adopt the theoretical framework of new materialism and treat materials as autonomous agents of meaning. In doing so, they risk overlooking the practice-based logic of *Tian Ren He Yi* (the unity of heaven and humanity)² embedded in Chinese artistic traditions (Dang and Lu 2024).

Much of the current literature remains at the level of broad cultural interpretation and rarely examines how materials, through concrete manipulation and compositional organization, are transformed into readable visual structures within individual artworks. While materials are frequently described as carriers of meaning, the micro-level mechanisms through which meaning emerges are seldom addressed. This absence of mechanism-based analysis allows Chinese material practices to be easily subsumed under Western theoretical paradigms, thereby obscuring their distinctive generative logic (MacKay 2022; Gao 2018; Stallabrass 2020).

To address this limitation, this article proposes an interpretive framework that shifts analytical attention from material form to the process of material signification. The study investigates how materials become stabilized as symbol-producing mechanisms through concrete operations and how these mechanisms generate expressive structures with cultural orientation.

To explore the pathways through which material meaning emerges, the study draws on the semiotic framework of Goodman (1968), examining a process that moves from intentional prefiguration to material exemplification³ and fundamentally to meaning production. This approach extends Barthes’s (1977) theory of anchoring⁴ into the domain of artistic media, shifting attention from the textual regulation of images to the prior selection of material properties by cultural schemata.

Within this perspective, artistic practice itself can be understood as a structural mediating force that organizes dispersed material elements into a coherent visual system. To bridge the gap between symbolic logic and material operation, the study also incorporates the framework of cultural techniques⁵ proposed by Siegert (2015). This perspective highlights how technical practice mediates between artistic intention and the symbolic order of material forms, allowing comprehensive material painting to be understood as a visual language generated through the interaction of symbolic structures and technical operations.

This study combines visual analysis, semi-structured interviews, and documentary research to examine 48 artworks by 12 artists, focusing on how materials, through concrete artistic practices, move beyond formal appearance and gradually assume symbolic functions within visual structures. Drawing on Nelson Goodman’s semiotic framework, the study develops an analytical model structured around the interconnected processes of anchoring, exemplification, and differentiation. Through this model, the author explores how cultural schemata provide materials with an initial semantic orientation, how specific material properties are selectively foregrounded through artistic operations, and how these

properties gradually stabilize as culturally inflected stylistic mechanisms. The framework further clarifies how materials shift from physical matter to symbolic structures during artistic production. Within this theoretical and empirical framework, this study addresses the following two core questions:

1. How are material properties selectively activated through the interaction between cultural schemata and material operations, and transformed into perceptible symbolic attributes in contemporary Chinese comprehensive material painting?
2. How do these foregrounded tactile attributes gradually stabilize into culturally oriented stylistic mechanisms and, in turn, participate in the construction of identity within contemporary Chinese art?

From this perspective, style is understood not as a fixed visual attribute, but as a symbolic mechanism that gradually emerges through material practice itself. Consequently, this study attempts to offer a more process-oriented analytical path for the logic of material manipulation in contemporary Chinese comprehensive material painting. By grounding the inquiry in Chinese artistic practice, it aims to provide a complementary perspective to contemporary discourse surrounding artistic materiality and cultural subjectivity.

2. Methods and Materials

This study adopts an interpretivist approach to explore how symbolic meaning is generated in contemporary Chinese comprehensive material painting and the cultural contexts in which it is embedded. Its epistemological foundation is grounded in the researcher's status as an "insider." In qualitative research, the researcher functions as a methodological instrument, requiring explicit recognition of the biographical connection between professional experience and research focus (Gray 2009). Long-term engagement in the field provides the researcher with a shared habitus, which reduces potential power imbalances in interviews and enables the collection of richer, more nuanced data based on common experiential logic (Trulsson and Burnard 2016). This insider perspective transcends mere background, transforming into "inside knowledge" that allows for a logical reconstruction of artists' micro-level decisions in material handling (Kerstetter 2012).

Even when the researcher and participating artists share the same professional field, the research unfolds within an intermediate space between internal participation and external observation, a multidimensional equilibrium (Mercer 2007; Bhabha 1996). Through deep experiential resonance, the researcher establishes intersubjective understanding with participants, allowing analysis to move beyond surface-level narratives and access the lived realities and material practices of artistic creation (Liamputtong 2010). This occupation-based understanding ensures that subtle sensory judgments in material handling are effectively captured and translated into analyzable academic insights.

To ensure interpretive validity and analytical depth, this study draws on a diverse range of materials, including visual evidence, semi-structured interviews, and archival texts, utilizing a framework of triangulation to enrich the interpretive perspective (Creswell and Poth 2017; Pillow 2010).

The research sample comprises forty-eight representative comprehensive material paintings by twelve artists active within the contemporary Chinese art system (see Table 1). These participants were selected based on their institutional recognition, having featured in major national exhibitions, such as the National Exhibition of Fine Arts, with the selection vetted by two field experts. For artwork selection, purposive sampling was used to identify information-rich cases for in-depth analysis (Patton 2015). The selected works were required to contain clear thematic content and cultural connotations, ensuring meaningful interpretability between visual imagery and its contextual framework. In contrast, purely abstract works were excluded from the study.

Table 1. Information on the Selected Artists.

Demographic Data for Participants				
Artist	Residence	Education	Media	Exhibitions & Awards
Wang Shuqin	China	Luxun Academy of Fine Arts with a Bachelor's Degree; Completed the Graduate Program at the Material Art Studio, Central Academy of Fine Arts.	Painting	The 7th Beijing International Art Biennale, China The 11th National Art Exhibition (Liaoning Exhibition Area)—Bronze Award
Feng Bin	China	Sichuan Fine Arts Institute with a Bachelor's Degree.	Painting	2015 The First Biennale of Comprehensive Material Painting. "Dunhuang Vistas" National Academic Invitational Exhibition of Renowned Artists' Comprehensive Material Paintings
Wu Zefeng	China	Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, Bachelor's Degree.	Painting	2020 The 3rd National (Ningbo) Biennale of Comprehensive Material Painting
Gong An	China	Nanchang Normal University, Bachelor's Degree. Nanjing Normal University, Master's Degree.	Painting	2019 The 13th National Art Exhibition, Ningbo Art Museum, Work Selected for Beijing Exhibition.
Xia Kaixi	China	Guangzhou University, Bachelor's Degree. Guangzhou University, Master's Degree.	Painting	2022 The 4th National (Ningbo) Biennale of Comprehensive Material Painting, Ningbo Art Museum.
Zhang Xueqi	China	Guangzhou University, Master's Degree.	Painting	2022 "Overlooking the Sea from the Mountain"—The First Guangdong Comprehensive Material Painting Exhibition, Bronze Award, Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts Museum.
Fu Yuhan	China	Southwest University, Bachelor's Degree. Southwest University, Master's Degree.	Painting	2019 The 13th National Art Exhibition—Comprehensive Material Painting Exhibition, Ningbo Art Museum.
Yan Mengyang	China	Renmin University of China, Bachelor's Degree. Renmin University of China, Master's Degree. Renmin University of China, Doctoral Degree.	Painting	2024 The 14th National Art Exhibition—Comprehensive Material Painting Exhibition, Shandong Art Museum.
Zhang Hao	China	Renmin University of China, Bachelor's Degree. Renmin University of China, Master's Degree. Renmin University of China, Doctoral Degree.	Painting	2024 The 14th National Art Exhibition—Comprehensive Material Painting Exhibition, Shandong Art Museum.
Jia Yangyang	China	University of Jinan, Bachelor's Degree.	Painting	2019 The 13th National Art Exhibition—Comprehensive Material Painting Exhibition, Ningbo Art Museum.

Table 1. Cont.

Demographic Data for Participants				
Artist	Residence	Education	Media	Exhibitions & Awards
Liang Jingyan	China	Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, Bachelor’s Degree.	Painting	2024 The 14th National Art Exhibition—Comprehensive Material Painting Exhibition, Shandong Art Museum.
Zhang Zhiyuan	China	Luxun Academy of Fine Arts, Bachelor’s Degree. Luxun Academy of Fine Arts, Master’s Degree.	Painting	2022 The First Sichuan Comprehensive Material Painting Art Exhibition, Excellence Award, Sichuan Art Museum.

Note: Table created by the authors.

In addition, the works needed to demonstrate exploratory engagement with material use and artistic techniques. All selected works were required to be original creations and to have been publicly exhibited or formally published, ensuring their scholarly value and the availability of relevant documentation.

The application of these criteria helps ensure consistency between the sample and the research objectives and supports a systematic approach to case analysis.

To further unpack these symbolic mechanisms, semi-structured interviews⁶ were conducted with the twelve representative artists⁷, occasionally supplemented by on-site studio observations. The value of this qualitative strategy lies in its capacity to capture the profound meaning of participants’ lived experiences in their own words, rather than through secondary accounts (Marshall and Rossman 2011). Utilizing the researcher’s professional literacy, these dialogues and observations map the embodied movements, tactile judgments, and technical navigation of chance events during material manipulation (Laughlin and Guo 2019). Additionally, exhibition catalogues, curatorial texts, and artist statements are analyzed to calibrate the tension between narrative representation and material expression.

Following visual methodologies (Rose 2016), this study combines visual and semiotic analysis, focusing on how image content and material are compositionally organized. The visual analysis begins with the immediate perception of what is depicted, moves into an examination of color in terms of its tonal variation, visual atmosphere, and relationship to the content, and then considers the overall formal organization, including visual rhythm, texture, and the interplay between dominant and secondary elements. Guided by these queries, the analysis examines textural traces, tearing, layering, and erosion to consider how bodily gestures and material resistance become embedded in the work’s visual structure, linking these material marks to their potential symbolic implications.

In this context, semiotic analysis is concerned less with producing a fixed interpretation of the artwork than with examining how meaning is constructed through the viewing process (Bal and Bryson 1991, p. 184). Accordingly, the artworks are analyzed through the lens of Nelson Goodman’s (1975) features of style, focusing on what is said, what is exemplified, and what is expressed.

Cross-case comparative analysis builds on the preceding case studies by constructing a collective case study comprising 48 works by 12 artists. When the research object consists of multiple cases, it becomes necessary to establish a consistent analytical framework in order to identify shared patterns that extend beyond individual cases (Ryan 2012).

To ensure consistency and systematic comparison, this study adopts three core dimensions derived from Goodman’s theory of symbols: Subject Matter, Exemplification, and Expression. Rather than treating these categories as isolated analytical units, they

function as an integrated framework for cross-case interpretation. Subject Matter addresses the thematic content and socio-cultural references embedded in the works. Exemplification focuses on how material properties, formal qualities, and symbolic presentation interact within the visual structure. Expression, in turn, concerns the emotional tone, value orientation, and cultural implications conveyed through the works.

Through systematic comparison across these shared dimensions, the study identifies recurring patterns in material practice, symbolic production, and cultural articulation within Chinese contemporary comprehensive material painting.

The interpretation of meaning draws on an intersection of symbolic structure analysis and craft-based inquiry, integrating the theoretical frameworks of Goodman (1968) and Siegert (2015). Goodman's semiotic perspective allows examination of how finished works operate symbolically, showing how material properties function as exemplars and how visual structures metaphorically convey cultural references. Siegert's discussion of cultural techniques, which are conceptualized here as material practices that establish the foundational conditions for meaning and cultural order, shifts attention toward operational acts. This perspective highlights how the selection, articulation, and treatment of matter delineate the boundary between raw materiality and cultural meaning. Through this integrative approach, style is understood as a symbolic mechanism emerging from the ongoing interaction of material operations and cultural intent. This methodology preserves the complexity of artistic practice while rendering meaning generation analytically accessible, providing a clear framework for interpreting the cultural expression of contemporary comprehensive material painting.

To address potential cognitive blind spots arising from insider status, the study applies epistemic reflexivity to maintain rigorous methodological calibration (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Through active questioning and dialogue, the research challenges assumptions embedded in shared habitus, fostering critical scrutiny of everyday practices (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). The research process is framed as co-construction between researcher and participants, resisting comfortable research routines and reducing bias. This reflexivity represents a posture of self-critique and conscious awareness (McGarry 2019). While shared habitus facilitates recognition of tacit knowledge, it may also risk overemphasizing internal coherence, potentially overlooking rupture or tension in material organization.

Accordingly, the study maintains a methodological focus on material operations rather than subjective inference regarding creative intent. Theoretical interpretations are grounded in concrete material handling, structural decisions, and technical choices, verified through semi-structured interviews with participating artists to ensure alignment with actual practice. Care is taken to distinguish descriptive observation from theoretical analysis, maintaining a clear separation between empirical evidence and conceptual reasoning. This epistemological stance balances insider depth with critical distance, ensuring that conclusions remain valid and robust within a broader academic context.

3. Results

3.1. Subject Matter as a Cultural Schema Anchoring Material Properties

In contemporary Chinese comprehensive material painting, the function of subject matter has shifted significantly. It no longer primarily serves a narrative role but operates as a pre-textual anchoring structure, stabilizing the relationship between the material's physical contingencies and specific cultural schemas. Drawing on Nelson Goodman's semiotic theory, the meaning of a symbol is not inherent in the object it depicts but arises from its function within a system. Consequently, subject matter in this context no longer seeks to reproduce reality; instead, it provides a directional reference for material use and establishes interpretive boundaries.

Material properties remain inherently open and indeterminate. Torn rice paper, corroded surfaces, or layered textures can be read as formal experimentation. Under this condition of suspended meaning, subject matter assumes a structural role. By invoking a particular cultural schema, it situates the material within a defined semantic framework, guiding viewers' perception from everyday experience toward culturally specific references, thereby stabilizing the material's symbolic function.

This mechanism is evident in Figure 1. Han-dynasty portrait brick motifs, fragmented Chinese characters, and wood-grain textures form the primary visual elements of the composition. Before the material is physically manipulated, the thematic framework of historical memory and cultural transformation already functions as a pre-textual cultural schema, shaping the visual atmosphere associated with antiquity, solemnity, and historical depth. Although the artist draws upon Marcel Duchamp's notion of the readymade at the conceptual level, this thematic anchoring leads the work toward a material approach distinct from that of Western readymade installations. Rather than directly appropriating existing objects, the artist constructs the image through collaged rubbings made on traditional Chinese Xuan paper, establishing a culturally specific visual structure.



Figure 1. Artworks: Wang Shuqin, *Yi Feng IV*, 2005, Mixed Media, 80 × 80 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

The work further transforms the material qualities of the paper itself. Through deliberate tearing and layered collage, the artist disrupts the traditional smoothness of Xuan paper, exposing the discontinuous resistance of its fibers. Repeated glazing and layers of pigment gradually build a tactile density across the surface. The embossed Han-dynasty portrait brick motifs then enter as cultural anchors, rhythmically embedded within the ruptured paper and accumulated color strata rather than simply placed on top of the image. As the artist explains, reverse rubbing and abstraction dissolve the original semantic content of the imagery, allowing the material to acquire a more stable historical resonance within the composition (Wang 2025, personal communication).

A similar process of image recoding can also be observed in Figure 2. The work is centered on the historical event of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, yet the scene itself is not represented directly through figurative narration. Before the material process begins, the theme of historical retrospection already operates as a pre-textual cultural framework that shapes both the perceptual boundaries of the image and the selection of material properties. In order to convey a sense of historical weight and the traces of time, the artist turns to aged metallic foil, layered rough textures, and collage-based media. As the artist notes, “The core of creation lies in whether materials can merge with the concept and attach themselves to the idea. To give the image a stronger sense of historical weight, I adopted a low-relief approach and made extensive use of modelling paste and wood in the process” (Jia 2025, personal communication). Under this prior thematic guidance, the dark grey background, symbolic red forms, and kinetic white textures transform a grand historical narrative into a material-based visual language, ensuring that the early organization of media is directly shaped by this conceptual anchoring.

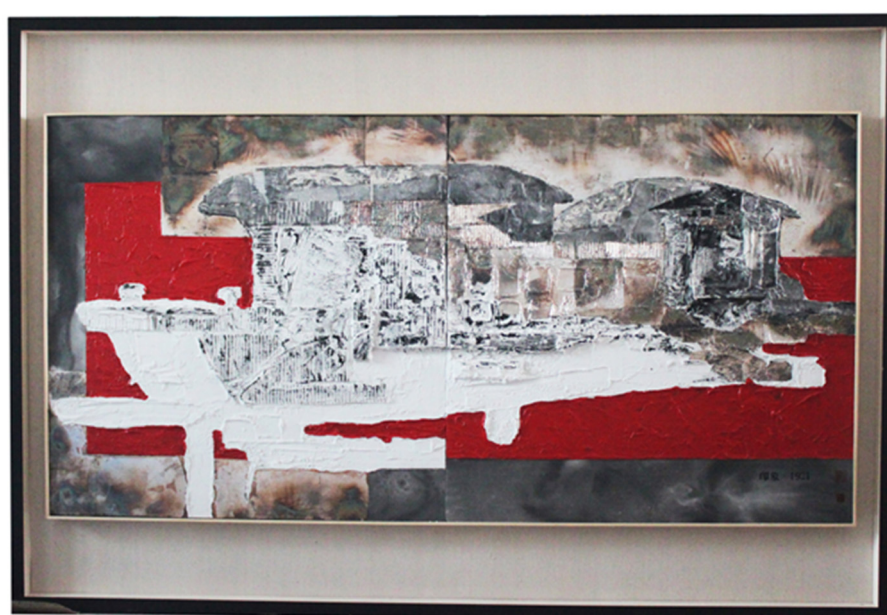


Figure 2. Artworks: Jia Yangyang, *Impression 1921*, 2016, Mixed Media, 198 × 135 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

In this light, subject matter in contemporary Chinese comprehensive material painting moves beyond mere narrative content and functions instead as a structural mechanism of reference. By activating specific cultural schemata, it directs the selection of material properties and establishes the boundaries of interpretation. In this process, materials are prevented from collapsing into purely formal experimentation and are instead transformed into relatively stable carriers of cultural signification.

3.2. Translating Material Resistance into Perceptual Form

During material manipulation, artists selectively accentuate particular properties, transforming material friction into perceivable symbolic cues. In practice, not all potential attributes of a material are activated simultaneously. Through deliberate technique, certain qualities are emphasized, allowing them to emerge as stable perceptual signals within the artwork.

Material resistance is not eliminated but transformed into visible evidence through artistic intervention. Materials must be organized within a formal structure to shift from latent potential to functioning symbolic carriers (Dang and Lu 2024). Which attributes are emphasized depends on the artist’s conceptual framework and technical expertise.

This process is marked by a reconfiguration of material properties. In Figure 3, the artist works with the resilience of Xuan paper through techniques such as compression, layering, and polishing, gradually producing a hardened surface reminiscent of stone. The paper's inherent softness and flexibility are replaced by a sense of mineral solidity. Through repeated pressing and abrasion, the tactile associations traditionally linked to Xuan paper, such as lightness, softness, and foldability, are progressively weakened. Densely layered fibres generate a compressed surface resistance, while irregular edges and variations in thickness reinforce the material's weight and visual inertia. This tactile estrangement gradually leads the viewer to perceive the material as something closer to stone or sediment. The surface retains clear traces of pressure and compression, distancing the paper from its conventional role as a support for writing.



Figure 3. Artworks: Wu Zefeng, *Yu-Mai*, 2019, Mixed Media, 180 × 200 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

This transformation emerges through the interaction between artistic intention and the unpredictable responses of the material itself. As the artist explains, the work pursues a sense of natural emergence by reducing overt craftsmanship and allowing the material's own qualities to remain visible. The spontaneous tearing and swelling of the fibres continuously produce material feedback during the process. Through this interaction, the artist further explores the materiality of ink and reverses the traditional logic of white space in Chinese ink painting. Instead of treating paper as an empty background, he saturates the entire surface with dense black ink, allowing ink itself to become the material ground of the image. As the artist recalled: "In Chinese painting, we usually use white paper. I did the opposite with ink. Others use white paper, but I use ink, so the ink itself becomes the paper. The whole surface is black, and forms emerge from within that blackness. . . yet the inner resonance, the fluidity, and the qualities of Chinese painting are still there" (Z. Wu 2025, personal communication).

Through this reversal, this tactile obduracy is transformed into a visible structural feature, giving the material a more active expressive role within the composition. In this process, the cultural schema of traditional ink painting does not vanish but operates as a latent intent, reversely anchoring the semantic direction of the black ink and stacked Xuan

paper, so that this tactile obduracy is eventually disciplined into a perceptual form carrying an Eastern spiritual core.

This process of material exemplification is similarly constructed through the inter-reference of disparate media. In Figure 4, the artist combines butterfly specimens, fine cotton threads, and spray paint to construct a hazy visual atmosphere. As natural objects, butterflies conventionally carry visual associations of lightness and fragility. Yet once lightly entangled by thin threads and dispersed across the pictorial space, their original stable forms are replaced by a spatial condition of suspension and drift. The faintly visible threads intertwine with flowing textures, creating a sense that the butterflies are wrapped, pulled, and suspended in an unstable state that resists fixation.



Figure 4. Artworks: Zhang Xueqi, Zhu MengY, 2022, Mixed media, 80 × 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Within this tension between materials, the butterflies move beyond their identity as mere natural specimens, while their latent fragility is gradually foregrounded through the subtle organization of the media. In this process, physical material properties are transformed into visual cues of uncertainty and ephemerality, responding to the work's emotional reflection on the condition of life. At its core, this coordination of material relations is anchored in a cultural awareness of temporal fading, through which the materials acquire a more directed symbolic resonance.

This semiotic mechanism of material recoding is activated through the deep interweaving of physical textures with historical iconography. In Figure 5, the hunting motifs derived from ancient murals are not simply reproduced as historical imagery. Instead, the

artist layers earth, fibers, and traditional ground-layer materials to reconstruct a material surface reminiscent of ancient wall paintings. Through technical manipulation, mineral pigments are repeatedly absorbed into and seep through the dry, coarse surface, producing a slow and resistant visual perception. At the same time, glazing and repeated scraping weaken the integrity of the image edges, gradually transforming the historical motifs into fragmented and residual traces.



Figure 5. Artworks: Zhang Hao, *Silk Road Heritage: The Hunting Scene*, 2020, Stone powder clay, mineral pigments, 120 × 160 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Within this process, cultural memory is activated through the integration of material thickness and formal structure, turning history into perceptible traces of time. The structural density generated by the weathered mural surface further intensifies this sense of historical temporality. Here, the ancient mural motifs function as semantic anchors, directing materials such as coarse earth, fibers, and mineral pigments toward a semantic field associated with historical erosion and the weight of time. As a result, symbolic meaning becomes internalized within the material structure of the work itself, continuously emerging through textures of peeling, abrasion, and weathering.

3.3. Cultural Techniques as Indexes of Identity

The formation of style in Chinese comprehensive material painting emerges through an ongoing process of negotiation, differentiation, and stabilization between artistic intention and material properties. Within this context, style functions not as an external visual ornament, but as the operational logic of the work's symbolic system (Goodman 1975). Through the reconfiguration of material properties, the exemplification of material relations, and the recoding of images, the physical resistance of matter is gradually transformed into perceptible symbolic structures.

The agency of the material itself weakens the direct presentation of predetermined content, compelling meaning to take shape through traces of operation and the unfolding presence of the medium. As a result, materiality and symbolism gradually reach a state of balance within the pictorial space, shifting the logic of painting away from representational imagery toward a mode of expression focused on material generation. In essence, this perceptual form emerges through the interaction between bodily engagement and material resistance after material properties have been anchored by pre-textual intention. As these material operations gradually stabilize into recognizable stylistic structures, they cease to

function as mere formal exercises and instead become legible indexes through which the cultural positioning of the work is articulated.

Within this differentiated perceptual order, emotion and identity no longer function as one-directional projections imposed upon passive matter. Rather, mediated by the reciprocal interaction between bodily techniques and material properties, they gradually sediment into a perceptible visual order across the intertwined dimensions of social experience, cultural memory, and individual intuition.

This mechanism manifests primarily as the visual reconfiguration of social experience. In Figure 6, the artist employs varying exposure durations in the cyanotype process to transform the face mask, a highly specific social symbol, into a visual rhythm that gradually shifts from clarity to disappearance. As the artist explains, the arrangement of masks, decreasing in both length and quantity, was intended to evoke a gradual process of “returning to zero,” tracing the easing of the pandemic and the slow restoration of daily life (Jia 2025, personal communication). Through differences in exposure and the progressive fading of imprints, the mask is detached from its practical function and reconfigured as a visual anchor of social experience. The slow dissipation of temporal sensation within the image becomes intertwined with the retreat of the pandemic itself, allowing the work to embody a collective sense of emotional release and social recovery. From the perspective of cultural techniques (Siegert 2015), cyanotype here no longer functions merely as an imaging method. By regulating the physical reactions of the material, it participates in the organization of temporality, allowing abstract lived experience to acquire a tangible and enduring form.

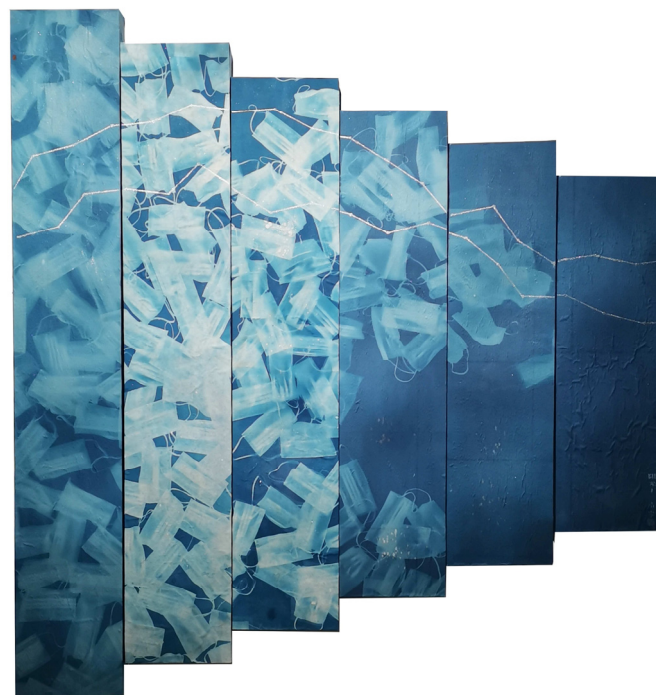


Figure 6. Jia Yangyang, *In the Sunlight: Clearing to Zero*, 2022, Mixed Media, 200 × 175 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

When social experience condenses into historical memory, the translation of emotion breaks away from linear narration through tactile material construction. In Figure 7, the artist combines Dunhuang soil, burlap, and sand brought back from the region to simulate the multilayered production techniques of Hexi Corridor murals. Through repeated accumulation, scraping, and partial removal, the Dunhuang soil gradually forms a coarse structure resembling weathered rock strata. As the material dries, cracking and peeling emerge naturally from these repeated operations. Reflecting on this process, the artist

explains that the work draws from the layered construction of traditional murals, ranging from sandstone foundations to fine mud coatings. Through repeated accumulation, abrasion, and polishing, the image gradually shifts away from direct figuration, while a sense of historical duration and temporality becomes embedded in the resistant texture of the material itself (Gong 2025, personal communication). Within this interaction between bodily operation and material response, the roughness and cracking of the soil are amplified, enabling the material to exemplify weathering and erosion in their own right. The coarse surface formed by particles and fissures gradually shifts perception away from conventional image reading toward a more tactile mode of apprehension.



Figure 7. Gong An, *Traces of the Silk Road no. 8*, 2019, Mixed media and oil on canvas, 190 × 150 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

As emotional translation returns to the level of individual experience, bodily technique becomes a cognitive medium connecting the subject and the material world. In Figure 8, the artist incises a mineral surface coated with iron powder using carving tools, transforming momentary bodily force into linear traces. As the blade moves across the surface, fractures appear along the edges of the incisions, while the exposed layers slowly oxidize through contact with airborne iron particles. Rust gradually spreads around the carved marks, giving the image a sense of slow sedimentation and decay. The artist's gestures and the oxidation process of the iron powder together establish a perceptible physical order, through which individual experience acquires temporal depth as a visual presence. Reflecting on this bodily intervention, the artist explains that the act of carving seeks the momentary vibration generated at the instant of incision. By carefully controlling the pressure and angle of the hand, bodily movement becomes directly connected to inner sensation, while the exposed marks continue to rust and oxidize over time (Liang 2025, personal communication). Through the intertwining of bodily traces and material oxidation, fleeting gestures gain a slowly accumulating temporal density.



Figure 8. Liang Jingyan, *Dimension of Existence I*, 2024, Mixed media on canvas, including Wuyi coloured earth, iron powder, and black mica sand, 150 × 200 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

The systematic differentiation of material properties allows the opaque properties of matter to become permanently organized within a readable visual structure. As cultural identity accumulates through cyanotype reactions, layered sedimentation, and the oxidation of iron powder, fragmented perceptions are drawn into a coherent visual order. In this process, cultural identity no longer exists merely as a conceptual label; rather, it gradually sedimentates into a material form that can be seen, touched, and perceptually experienced.

3.4. Symbolic Mechanisms

Analysis of the above cases demonstrates that the formation of style in contemporary Chinese comprehensive material painting functions as a symbolic mechanism of differentiation. In this study, differentiation refers to the process through which selectively foregrounded material properties gradually stabilize into culturally recognizable stylistic structures through repeated bodily operations and perceptual reinforcement. Under the guidance of artistic intention, material properties are continuously distinguished and encoded through bodily technique. What begins as diffuse, unstructured material experience is thus organized into a coherent perceptual order.

This mechanism is first evident in the artist's selective recognition of material attributes. Guided by conceptual intent, the artist identifies and anchors the physical qualities that correspond to the thematic focus, gradually establishing stable referential relationships between material forms and subject matter. In this way, materials acquire a clear expressive direction through the processes of selection and amplification.

The generative nature of the materials themselves, in turn, continues to influence the work. The natural traces produced through flowing, layering, and polishing introduce subtle disruptions to preexisting compositional plans, creating new formal possibilities. The artist's experiential judgment determines which of these accidental outcomes are preserved and integrated into the visual structure. Ultimately, the generativity of the material and the aesthetic awareness of the artist interlock in practice, collectively shaping the final form of the work.

Bodily technique serves as a critical mediating force throughout this process. By continuously adjusting the interaction between hand and material, the artist reinforces certain physical properties. Whether through preplanned control or responsive engagement with material feedback, the core mechanism remains the programmatic engagement of technique with the material, transforming raw substances into expressive symbolic carriers. Through repeated interaction, the work gradually develops a relatively stable visual structure.

From a semiotic perspective, this differentiation highlights specific material attributes while masking irrelevant features, continually redefining the boundary between matter and cultural symbol. When this perceptual order aligns with particular cultural experiences, the work transitions from a mere assemblage of materials to an organized expressive system. Within this process, historical memory, social experience, and bodily intuition become intertwined, allowing previously dispersed material properties to acquire the capacity for cultural signification.

The formation of this perceptual order further provides the basis for understanding the cultural positioning of the work. Style does not emerge from arbitrary formal arrangement, but develops through the sustained interaction among material properties, bodily technique, and cultural context. Through this process, materials move from perceptual organization toward symbolic expression, gradually forming the material foundation through which cultural identity becomes perceptible.

The dynamic interaction among material, technique, and cultural context ultimately converges in the Dynamic Model of Semiotic Generation in Contemporary Chinese Comprehensive Material Painting (see Figure 9). The model outlines the process through which materials move beyond their raw physical state, are transformed into perceptual signals, and gradually stabilize within a broader cultural–symbolic order.

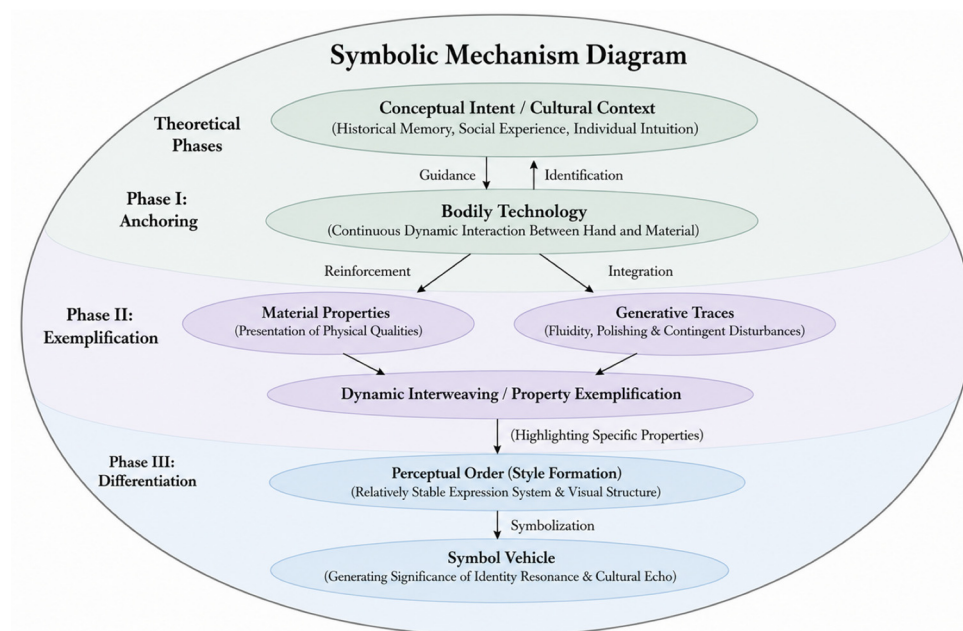


Figure 9. A Theoretical Model of the Symbolic Generation Mechanism in Contemporary Chinese Comprehensive Material Painting. Note: This model outlines the process through which materials gradually move from raw physical substance into cultural symbols. Guided by pre-textual schemata, material properties are first selected and anchored within specific semantic directions. Bodily techniques then intervene through tactile judgment and cultural techniques, organizing material resistance into relatively stable formal structures (exemplification). Through ongoing differentiation, these stabilized structures gradually accumulate across social, historical, and individual dimensions, allowing physical resistance to be integrated into a broader cultural–symbolic order.

4. Discussion

This study explores the underlying logic of meaning-making in contemporary Chinese comprehensive material painting through a detailed analysis of artists and their works. We find that a material's significance does not reside in its inherent physical properties; rather, it emerges within a perceptual order shaped by the interaction of artistic intention and material conditions. The coherence of style arises from a traceable chain of practice: the semantic orientation of subject matter, the selective activation of material attributes, and the compositional organization of the pictorial system. This finding successfully advances the current research paradigm, moving beyond mere medium-specific technologies to a more nuanced layer of material meaning-generation mechanisms (Hu 2021; Peng 2024).

At the material level, physical entities demonstrate substantial interpretive potential. In practice, subject matter functions as a "pre-textual structure," guiding early-stage decisions about materials. Drawing on Nelson Goodman's theory of exemplification, material attributes only attain symbolic function when deliberately selected and highlighted. This addresses the critical gap identified by Jensen (1973), who questioned how an artist determines which specific traits among a work's numerous properties carry expressive significance. This study reveals that such screening is not arbitrary; the thematic orientation of a work establishes the sensory thresholds for material handling. When a subject references historical memory, the pre-textual structure naturally filters out material features that conflict with the narrative context. Consequently, materials tend to emphasize properties capable of bearing traces of time: a tear is transformed from random damage into a slow, resistant unfolding; polishing no longer seeks mere surface smoothness but retains wear marks through repeated friction, leaving visible stratifications that accumulate over time. In this process, physical resistance becomes perceptible as "tactile temporality," a delayed sensory experience produced when bodily gestures encounter resistant material surfaces, manifested as the subtle delay when the hand engages with material opacity. This aligns with Lin Tianmiao's observation that Chinese artists' cultural awareness of materials emerges from sustained intervention via culturally informed techniques (Guest 2022).

The conversion of physical material opacity into perceptual experience establishes an immediate dialogue between bodily feedback and material response. Meaning in comprehensive material painting relies on the artist's direct engagement with the opacity of matter. In Wu Zefeng's practice, for instance, repeated compression, abrasion, and ink saturation transform the softness of Xuan paper into a hardened tactile surface. Each intervention generates immediate material feedback, requiring continuous negotiation between bodily intention and material resistance.

Frequent interaction produces traces that resist pre-planning. In Cai Guoqiang's gunpowder paintings, the scorched edges and soot deposits left after explosions create unique visual tension. These forms result from instantaneous physical reactions and are preserved as integral components of the final composition. In traditional Chinese aesthetics, such unplanned traces are valued as quintessential expressions of vitality. Rather than suppressed, these material contingencies are permitted to emerge organically, synchronizing creative intention with material dynamics. The resulting works embody a dynamic aesthetic rooted in the indigenous conceptualization of mind-matter integration (Zong 2023), thus empirically activating a native praxis characterized by the mutual infiltration of subject and object (Man 2012; Dang and Lu 2024).

These observations prompt a critical reassessment of new materialist perspectives that emphasize decentered agency and the active role of non-human matter (Park 2025). While new materialism challenges conventional subject-object dichotomies by positioning matter as an autonomous agent, the artistic practices examined in this study suggest a more relational interaction between material, technique, and cultural intention. The meaning

carried by materials does not emerge autonomously; instead, it is selectively activated through cultural techniques. As [Siegert \(2015\)](#) underscores, cultural techniques operate fundamentally by establishing boundaries between raw matter and cultural meaning via specific media operations. Consequently, the physical traces left by these manual manipulations become visible signs of cultural consciousness and “re-Sinicization” ([Shi 2008](#); [Xing 2010](#)).

This process also resonates with [Stuart Hall’s \(1990\)](#) argument that identity should be understood as an ongoing process of production rather than a fixed essence. The contemporary activation of traditional media moves beyond fixed nationalist visual forms. Here, “Chineseness” is not grounded in stable ethnic symbols, but gradually formed through the translation of local material experience and the embodied negotiation between subject and object within the global art system ([Davidson 2016](#); [Clarke 2019](#)). Local identity is therefore continuously materialized and rearticulated through the evolving relationship between form and matter.

By developing the analytical model of “anchoring–exemplification–differentiation,” this study renders the production of material meaning into a traceable operational process. In doing so, it proposes a localized interpretive framework for Chinese comprehensive material painting that differs from Western new materialist approaches, while also responding to [MacKay’s \(2022\)](#) critique concerning the absence of mechanism-based indigenous theories in contemporary Chinese art. At the same time, certain limitations remain. Most of the selected cases are drawn from official exhibitions and therefore cannot fully represent the latest practices involving digital technologies. Future research may further investigate how digital media and physical materials intersect to shape emerging forms of cultural identity and artistic positioning.

In sum, the evidence demonstrates that style formation in Chinese comprehensive material painting emerges from the co-evolution of artistic intention and material properties mediated by cultural techniques. Through dynamic negotiation between control and response, the material obduracy becomes a tactile record of cultural memory. These practices preserve creative vitality while offering a materialized narrative model, rearticulating the Chinese artistic experience within a global context.

5. Conclusions

This study examines how materials in Chinese comprehensive material painting move from physical properties to cultural signification through concrete artistic practice. The findings suggest that cultural consciousness operates from the outset of creation as a pre-textual schema, shaping the selection and foregrounding of material attributes within specific cultural contexts. Through the continuous interaction between thematic orientation, material resistance, and bodily technique, dispersed physical qualities gradually stabilize into recognizable stylistic forms. Style, in this sense, is not merely a visual appearance, but a practical logic developed through material operations, reflecting the ongoing negotiation between artistic intention and material conditions.

The proposed “anchoring–exemplification–differentiation” model is used to explain the mechanism of meaning generation in Chinese comprehensive material painting. It foregrounds the co-constitutive role of artistic intention, embodied techniques, and cultural context in the transformation of materials, thereby revealing how material properties are progressively reconfigured into culturally inflected symbolic systems. In contrast to new materialist approaches that tend to regard materials as autonomous agents, this model places greater emphasis on cultural techniques and situated practices as mediating forces in the production of meaning. In this regard, it serves not only as a systematic analytical framework for studying Chinese comprehensive material painting, but also

offers a localized interpretive lens for understanding China's artistic practice within the global material turn.

At a broader theoretical level, the study further demonstrates that material practice is not limited to the formation of individual aesthetic experience, but is also deeply implicated in the ongoing construction of cultural identity within a globalized context. Rather than relying on the mere appropriation of symbolic forms, this process translates the traditional philosophical notion of the unity of mind and matter into a contemporary interpretive framework, revealing a continuously emerging form of local cultural identity within global artistic discourse. Comprehensive material painting thus provides a way of understanding local cultural experience through material practice, where cultural identity is continuously articulated through the interaction between form and material.

This study is primarily concerned with the generative relationship between humans and materials in contemporary Chinese art practice, while also attempting to offer a transferable analytical perspective for materiality studies across different cultural contexts. Such a locally grounded interpretive framework not only helps explain how Chinese artists construct cultural positioning through material practice, but also provides a complementary perspective for understanding cultural differences in human–material relations within the discourse of new materialism, thereby expanding the articulation of Chinese experience within global material turn scholarship.

From a practical perspective, the study suggests that material practices in art should be understood through attention to how materials are integrated with cultural conceptual frameworks via concrete operational mechanisms. Although the study is limited in terms of sample scope and media diversity, future research may further examine how regional cultural differences shape material practices, and how material signification is reinterpreted and reconstructed across cross-cultural contexts, thereby deepening the understanding of the relationship between materiality and cultural identity.

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Notes

- ¹ The concept of Comprehensive Material Painting, formalized in 2010, is fundamentally distinct from Western “Mixed Media.” It integrates diverse materials within the language of painting to engage directly with Chinese artistic traditions, establishing an autonomous academic paradigm rooted in indigenous cultural logic.
- ² Derived from the *I Ching* (Book of Changes), this concept is re-interpreted within the context of contemporary comprehensive material painting as a non-dualistic philosophical perspective. It emphasizes a harmonious resonance between the artist's subjective intention and the material's objective properties.

- 3 Nelson Goodman distinguishes three basic symbolic functions in art: denotation, exemplification, and expression. Denotation answers the question ‘what the work is about,’ referring to the act of representation or depiction. Exemplification occurs when a symbol refers to a property it literally possesses and displays as a sample.
- 4 Barthes initially defined “anchoring” as a linguistic function that directs the viewer’s interpretation of a polysemous visual image, effectively “pinning down” its potential meanings. In this study, the term is re-contextualized to describe the cognitive process by which cultural schemata constrain the inherent ambiguity of raw materials, ensuring they function as stable carriers of specific cultural signifiers.
- 5 Siegert (2015) conceives of ‘cultural techniques’ as material practices that constitute the very conditions under which distinctions, symbols, and meanings come into being. This view corresponds with the present study’s argument that meaning arises through material processes of differentiation, manipulation, and structuring.
- 6 The primary data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews with twelve representative artists between August and December 2025. These interviews were conducted either in person at the artists’ private studios or via Tencent Meeting, depending on the participants’ availability and geographic location.
- 7 Participants were selected for their academic standing and success in official exhibitions. Each provided four exhibition-proven works, ensuring the visual analysis represents the field’s authoritative standards. All artists granted informed consent for the use of their names and visual documentation.

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