



## Curator Essay by Xie Xiaoze

July 27 – September 27, 2025

**June, 2025 (Palo Alto, CA)** - I often feel that our generation—those of us who grew up in the 1980s—was particularly fortunate. It was a time filled with idealism, when young people widely cherished poetry, and when numerous "campus poets" like myself emerged. In the twilight of the Old Summer Palace, or late at night in the dormitories after the lights had gone out, whenever lines of verse sprang to my mind, I would hastily grab a pen and chase after my leaping thoughts on paper. Later, during revision, circles, lines, and arrows drove words and phrases across the page, weaving and intersecting them. Amid all the crossing-out and rearranging, images condensed, and rhythms formed. Poetry might be inspired by the touch of a scene, a reflective moment during reading, or begin with a deep sigh; though the sounds of language speak to the ear, for me the creation of poetry always appeals to the eye. It is an extension and realization from mind to hand—an experience of "what the mind wishes, the hand accomplishes."

I've always been interested in calligraphy, but I didn't start seriously studying it until 2017. It was the moment I went to Dunhuang Academy for a residency, when I had just turned fifty. Leaving aside the debates between "stele and model script" schools, I personally lean toward the "scriptural" side of calligraphy. From *Dunhuang* sutras and government documents, from historical letters of every dynasty to Lu Xun's handwritten drafts, functional writing emerged from necessity. The restraint of Lu Ji's *Pingfu Tie*, the joyous energy of Zhong Yao's *Hejie Biao*, the grief in Yan Zhenqing's *Draft of a Requiem to My Nephew*—writing also becomes a medium of expression. Perhaps unintentionally, such expressions reached what we later came to define as the height of "art." I often wonder: are the gestures, speeds, and rhythms of writing drawn by thoughts and emotions? Does reverence, joy, rage, or sorrow spill out into text and calligraphy? In the contrasts of heavy and light, quick and slow, tight and loose, thought and emotion leave their trace.

In Chinese history, "literati calligraphy" has been considered an elite art form. Its practitioners were poets, writers, scholars, and statesmen with deep cultural cultivation, not merely skilled artisans. Most of the works in this exhibition represent the continuation of that tradition, as many of the exhibitors move freely among literature, calligraphy, contemporary art, and other spheres, taking on multiple identities. **Li Xianting** is an art critic and an influential promoter of

contemporary art; **Jia Pingwa** is a writer; **Ouyang Jianghe**, **Xi Chuan**, **Yu Mingquan**, and **Zhao Xuesong** are poets; while **Xu Bing**, **Gu Wenda**, **Zhang Xiaogang**, **Yang Jiechang**, **Fong Chong-ray**, **Wang Tiande**, **Qiu Zhijie**, and I primarily engage with contemporary art rather than traditional calligraphy. **Liu Zhengcheng** and **Yang Tao**, both calligraphers, are also scholars. **Gu Gan**, a forerunner of modern calligraphy, **Wang Dongling**, noted for his controversial "chaotic script," and **Shao Yan**, celebrated for his distinctive modern calligraphy, are not conventional career calligraphers. Indeed, Wang Dongling's and Yu Mingquan's works have even been criticized as "ugly writing." Nor is this exhibition a showcase of contemporary literary calligraphy; rather, by presenting various kinds of works, it explores the relationship between mind and hand, between text and vision, and the ways these relationships transform between "elite art" and everyday writing, between tradition and the contemporary.

Most modern and contemporary calligraphic works are created with aesthetic intentions, thus becoming somewhat secondary (or interpretive) practices in terms of content. Every act of copying literary texts is an act of re-reading, comprehension, and resonance—a renewed "performance" and visual interpretation. On one hand, it involves a silent recitation of the words themselves; on the other, it offers a fresh rendition (or even a breakthrough) of historical calligraphic exemplars. During this dynamic process of writing, individual temperament, cultivation, and taste naturally emerge. The calligraphic works of Jia Pingwa, Li Xianting, Liu Zhengcheng, Yang Tao, and Zhao Xuesong, which copy classical poetry and other literary texts, demonstrate profound skill and varied artistic sensibilities, yet all fall into this category of practice. Li Xianting, in addition to creating copied works, produces bold and expressive large-character pieces, directly voicing his frustrations, melancholy, and critical stance toward contemporary reality through a single word or phrase.

The tension between writing and creating, tradition and innovation, is vividly captured in the artistic journey of Ouyang Jianghe, whose career presents a deeply reflective case. Ouyang Jianghe practiced calligraphy in his youth but, after becoming captivated by modern poetry in his teenage years, abandoned it entirely, perhaps fearing that traditional culture would fundamentally obstruct "contemporary" innovation. Two decades later, he returned to calligraphy, finding in it a spiritual nostalgia he could not relinquish for the rest of his life. Ouyang Jianghe and Yu Mingquan, both poets, share literary subjects in their calligraphic works, embracing both ancient classics and their own poetic compositions. Their individual styles, however, differ significantly: Jianghe often merges regular script, clerical script, and cursive, characterized by a free-flowing elegance, whereas Mingquan's approach is more vigorous and unadorned. Yet both share structures that are strikingly angular and possess a childlike simplicity, rejecting the excessively soft, flirtatious, smooth, and sweet tendencies prevalent in popular calligraphic styles. Perhaps contemporary literary creativity has uniquely nourished their calligraphy, empowering it with a distinct innovative vitality.

Gu Gan (1942-2020) was a key figure in the “Modern Calligraphy” movement in the avant-garde art of the 1980s and 1990s in China, and a representative artist in the abstract art of the East. In 1985, he initiated and organized “The First Exhibition of the Society of Modern Calligraphy and Painting” which had profound and lasting influences. Over more than three decades, he explored the integration of the linear structure and meaning of Chinese characters with modern abstract painting, and developed his highly personal pictorial vocabularies and styles. Layered lines and forms, resonating symbols, subtle visual textures and rich colors are among the hallmarks of Gu Gan’s distinctive mixed media works.

Wang Dongling has practiced calligraphy for over sixty years. Early on, he underwent rigorous training in various traditional scripts—regular, seal, clerical, running, and cursive—and mastered them thoroughly. Beginning in the mid-1980s, he embarked on explorations into modern calligraphy, creating monumental cursive works introduced into public spaces, while simultaneously experimenting with modern ink painting. In recent years, Wang Dongling has become internationally renowned for his innovative “chaotic script,” venturing into mixed-media and installation art, thus attracting wide attention across both the calligraphy and contemporary art worlds. His “chaotic script,” executed with skillful cursive brushwork, weaves, displaces, and overlaps Chinese characters. The spontaneous, ever-changing lines resemble slanting lotus stems, dancing bamboo shadows, or swirling rain and snow, seemingly transcending the confines of paper. The dynamic energy and rhythm of these strokes evoke the resonant effects of music—rushing, bursting forth, echoing, and diffusing. At this juncture, reading yields completely to viewing; the communicative function of text weakens or dissolves entirely, transforming into purely abstract visual elements. I don’t understand the criticism this “chaotic script” receives. If we can appreciate Xu Wei’s blotches of ink, Huang Binhong’s “messy” landscapes, or Jackson Pollock’s uninhibited splashes, why cannot we accept Wang Dongling’s “chaotic script”?

Shao Yan’s modern calligraphy lies between calligraphy and painting. In the ’80s and ’90s, his “few-character” works use the basic structure of Chinese characters to develop compositional arrangement, spatial interplay, and rhythmic flow, while also incorporating the techniques of abstract painting. These works remind me of Japanese calligrapher Inoue Yuichi and American Abstract Expressionist Franz Kline. From 2007 to 2008, Shao Yan underwent three stent surgeries for coronary heart disease. Confronted on his sickbed by needles, medical instruments, and fluid bags, and faced with the brush of mortality, he experienced a new insight. He began experimenting with injecting ink through medical syringes so that the sprayed “ink points” would guide his brushstrokes—a method he calls “the traces of the heart.” For the artist, the syringe connects to veins and heart; this form of writing is a joint, united movement of heart and hand. The immediacy and spontaneity of this act embody a state of life itself.

The interchange between calligraphy and painting can be considered an important strand in Chinese abstract art. Text has appeared in visual works throughout a long, rich history. I

wonder— when Chinese painters inscribe poetry on their works, is it an expression of lingering emotion after the painting is done, or is it a way to extend and supplement the visual's inherent limitations? I even suspect that, in traditional Chinese painting—often reusing age-old formulas of brushwork and composition—artists might be unable to fully convey their feelings, so they rely on inscriptions in language to guide the viewer's imagination beyond the painting, endowing it with deeper emotion and meaning.

Language is a tool of thought, perhaps even thought itself. Words flash, extinguish, and linger in the mind. As syllables and images flow, text becomes narrative, an utterance, and an expression of ideas. In Western contemporary art, incorporating text and combining image with text is commonplace. Conceptual art often takes advantage of the directness and abstraction of language itself to reduce or even remove the visual aspects of traditional art.

Xu Bing's work stems from an analysis, deconstruction, and transformation of language itself. In his practice, form and meaning, readability and unreadability, mutually dissolve and convert into one another, embracing contradiction and paradox. In the late 1980s, he created the conceptually charged and renowned piece, *Book from the Sky* (Tianshu), in which he freely combined various strokes and radicals of Chinese characters to form mysterious, seemingly familiar yet illegible "heavenly writings." The meticulous structure of Song typeface and the traditional format of thread-bound books endowed these unreadable characters with a powerful visual aesthetic quality. In the 1990s, after moving to America, he invented English calligraphy, transforming English letters into elemental forms reminiscent of Chinese character strokes. Using Chinese structural arrangements such as left-right, top-bottom, and inside-outside compositions, each English word became a square-shaped character. These squared characters appeared even more unfamiliar yet remained readable; thus, the "spelling" system of Latin-based languages became akin to the "writing" system of Asian scripts.

Gu Wenda was an early experimenter in combining Chinese calligraphy, the vocabulary of traditional Chinese painting, abstract ink elements, and mixed media. He is a representative artist of the "1985 New Wave Art Movement", particularly in the field of experimental ink painting. In his experiments with Chinese characters, he employs techniques such as disassembly, recombination, and substitution to merge two or more characters into new, more complex forms. He transforms words—or even an entire phrase—into a single "character." At first glance, these may appear to be errors, but they are recognizable and follow the structural logic of Chinese writing. His early work was more rebellious and avant-garde in nature. More recently, he has used these spontaneously generated characters to transcribe classical poetry, creating works that could be described as a kind of "Chinese Character Pop Art" infused with the spirit of intellectual games and entertainment.

Chinese-French artist Yang Jiechang became known for his minimalist "Ten Thousand Layers of Ink" series. Yet he has also produced a large body of text-based works closely tied to conceptualism. From subject matter to style, Yang's practice reverses the literati tradition of genteel "self-cultivation" and embraces a distinctively personal approach. He often writes content that is straightforward and mundane rather than literary. In a manner akin to graffiti, he

repeats “OMyGod” or “Diu” (a Cantonese profanity), each iteration expressing shock or cursing at the vexing realities of life. In *A Complete Catalogue of the PRC’s Campaigns Over Seventy Years*, he coldly arranges an endless list of modern political campaigns in slightly stiff regular script, in chronological order, quietly conveying the heavy weight of history.

Reading and writing have always been central themes in Zhang Xiaogang’s paintings. His early works, such as *Abyss Series* and *Nightmare Series*, depicted books illuminated by flashlights and severed arms engaged in writing. In his photographic series, handwritten notes and letters are superimposed upon photographs carrying collective memories, resembling a faint, elusive offscreen voice in a film. The layering and dislocation of images and text evoke blurred, multi-layered memories and drifting thoughts.

Fong Chong-ray, born in Henan, joined Taiwan’s “May Painting Society” in his youth to create abstract ink paintings. After moving to the San Francisco Bay Area in 1975, he began studying Buddhism, and his art came to incorporate more calligraphic strokes. His recent acrylic paintings on canvas display a highly personal and distinctive style: abstract color blocks and written Chinese Buddhist scriptures, stacked and interwoven so that the surface appears like a mottled wall covered with destructive scratches or graffiti left by countless tourists. The words themselves have a simplicity, directness, calmness, and even childlike awkwardness—no “scholarly air,” no blatant individual “expression.” Subtle and understated, these paintings reveal a craftsman-like complexity of process, a layering of time and labor.

I myself mostly work in oil painting and installation, but I have introduced brushwork into my recent pieces. This began in 2017 during my residency at Dunhuang Academy, sponsored by the Dunhuang Foundation in the United States. The choice was initially inspired by the Chinese historical and cultural setting, and by my need to record, reflect, and devise concepts—essentially returning to the roots of functional writing. My project, *Amber of History: Reimagining the Dunhuang Library Cave* (2017–), revolves around the cave’s singular history and its encyclopedic contents. This ink scroll integrates notes, diagrams, calligraphy, architectural and sculpture sketches, and fragments of images from unearthed manuscripts. It faithfully captures the process of learning, analysis, and imagination, providing the blueprint for a series of subsequent ink paintings, sculptures, and installations. The work quotes widely in its content and borrows from the physical form of Dunhuang manuscripts, yet it also stands as a finished piece in its own right. Later, particular motifs and sections within the scroll developed into separate artworks, accompanied by inscriptions functioning as interpretative texts, with calligraphic styles influenced significantly by the sutra-copying scripts from the Dunhuang manuscripts.

In the summer of 2017, I attended the exhibition *Ink Writing Modern Literature* at the National Museum of Modern Chinese Literature in Beijing. The display of contemporary literati calligraphy by Ouyang Jianghe and Yu Mingquan deeply inspired me. The idea of curating the present exhibition emerged in January 2021 while I was practicing calligraphy at home during the pandemic. My thoughts soon took form as a handwritten diagram featuring a series of keywords and names arranged from left to right under three categories—“Poets and Writers,” “Calligraphers,” and “Contemporary Artists.” Beneath each category was a group of names, but more names floated in the spaces between, representing cross-disciplinary authors. I quickly

discussed these initial thoughts with Ouyang Jianghe through voice messages. His ideas were expansive, even touching upon a transnational and transcultural concept he called the “civilization of writing.” However, we eventually refocused the exhibition’s theme specifically on Chinese calligraphy. Throughout the subsequent preparations, Ouyang Jianghe played a pivotal role in shaping the selection of participating artists and the overall direction of the exhibition.

The history, forms, and stylistic nuances of Chinese characters are remarkably rich and subtle, their unique visuality perhaps tracing back to their origins as pictographs. As Ouyang Jianghe aptly noted, “Chinese characters were specifically invented for writing. Without practicing calligraphy, one cannot fully appreciate the profound depths of these characters.” Indeed, calligraphy has always held a particularly significant place in the history of Asian art as well as contemporary artistic practice. This exhibition provides abundant examples and opportunities for exploring Chinese character writing both as a medium of communication and as an aesthetic creation, as well as the delicate interplay between text and vision.

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### **About Qualia Contemporary Art**

Located in downtown Palo Alto, the heart of Silicon Valley, Qualia Contemporary Art is dedicated to showcasing outstanding established and emerging artists working in a variety of media. The gallery is committed to building lasting relationships with artists, collectors, curators, and scholars nationally and internationally, and providing a vital platform for dialogues on contemporary art and culture in the Bay Area and beyond.

### **Location**

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