



# CROSSING TIME

A calligraphy prodigy trained in Inner Mongolia, KAIFAN WANG is now making his mark as one of his generation's most promising abstract expressionists.

*Benjamin Barlow* joins the artist on the bridge



For the young novice, the hour is at hand. At his studio apartment, he turns away from a half-finished canvas and toward his computer, waking it for his online class in the techniques of the Peking opera. After greeting his teacher, he begins to warm up, sounding out scale after scale. Then comes the crux of the lesson: what in Western opera is known as the *passaggio*, the moment the singing voice ascends, unbroken, from one register to another, thus forming a passage, or a bridge. He starts out in a lower register, and here he is confident. Here he is free. But as he nears the first passage, he becomes apprehensive, and his mind starts to cloud with musical minutiae. Having behind him only a single year's practice, he is still so focused on the technique itself that the song's emotional sense—and whatever a singer might artfully lend it—remains well beyond his reach. For now, he is stuck on the bridge.

But in art and life, the Chinese artist Kaifan Wang does not mind lingering exactly there. He tells me so after I arrive at his Berlin-Mitte studio one winter morning, just following opera class. "When I was younger," he says, "I always placed art in a very important position. I thought it should be higher than me. Back then, that distance made me afraid to make art—because I've always wanted what I'm doing to really make sense, to reach





“I’ve always wanted what I’m doing to really make sense, to reach people”

Opening spread left: KAIFAN WANG photographed in Berlin by VITALI GELWICH for BLAU International  
Opening spread right: FEDERLEICHT AN ZWEIGEN, 2023, oil, oil stick, acrylic on canvas, 160 × 120 cm

Above: TUMBLEWEED, 2023, oil, oil stick, acrylic on canvas, 200 × 280 cm  
Right: AXILLARY BUD, 2022, oil, oil stick, acrylic on canvas, 160 × 120 cm

people.” Now, with painting at least, that fear has faded well into the background. He has spent enough time on the bridge that the Great Distance does not feel so great anymore.

Wang serves tea without milk from an elegant tea set, and as he elaborates on his artistic beginnings, I can’t help but notice the ringing in my ears. Caused by my own humble attempts at music some years ago, the sound, I admit to myself, is definitely more disturbing than it once was. I look around the studio apartment—a rack of canvases, an open drawer of paints, a concise cabinet of

books, all neatly arranged; and then just a few flecks of paint on the wall, overflowing the edges of a now-removed painting in progress—and I put the ringing out of my mind.

Born in 1996 in the northern Chinese city of Hohhot in Inner Mongolia, Wang was six years old when he began to attend painting and calligraphy school on Saturdays and Sundays, repeating over and over the rigorous movements of those ancient arts. The natural course would then have been for him to enroll at a university, but he decided such institutions place an overwhelming emphasis on fundamentals. He would’ve had to put his painting aside for drawing—a detour

he did not wish to take. Thus he resolved to move abroad, but he likes to plan things, he says, so at 19 he relocated to Beijing for a decisive preparatory year.

There, he took German classes, and, living in the 798 district—the city’s art zone—he consumed contemporary Western art for the first time. “Contemporary art had been very confusing for me,” he says. “It hadn’t attracted me to look deeper.” But knowing he would soon leave China, Wang engaged a private teacher, a graduate of London’s Royal Academy, to hasten his education before he made his *viaggio* to Europe. “She taught me another way to think about art, how to use a different eye to see the works,” he says, sipping his tea, which has just now cooled to drinking temperature.

Another important moment that year was when he encountered a Jehovah’s Witness. With him, the first American he’d ever met, Wang studied the Bible, something he continued even after relocating to Berlin in 2016—until he learned that, according to their teachings, the soul dies with the body. A proposition Wang could not accept. I’m interested to find that this is not his only experience with organized religion. Back in Hohhot, he once had a chance encounter with an old Hare Krishna woman, and was drawn in by the community and ceremony. Wang tells me he wanted to understand why the Hare Krishnas made their offerings to the gods, putting things like flowers or milk in front of statues. He explains, “They say that if you are doing a very good service, the faces of the gods will become fatter and fatter.” Meeting my eyes from across the narrow table, he adds, “And they really are!”

It was 2022 when Wang graduated from Berlin’s University of the Arts. That same year, his work was seen at the institution’s *Rundgang* by Marta Gnyp, and, also that same year, he had his first solo show around the corner,

## Kaifan Wang

at the Gnyp Gallery’s Charlottenburg space. In an interview accompanying the exhibition *Whistling Dune*, the artist said that his paintings relate to his memories and experiences: “One day, when I was walking along the streets of Berlin, a gust of wind blew sand in my eyes. It was only slightly irritating, but it reminded me of uncomfortable childhood memories of sandstorms in my hometown.” So came *The Sand Blew Into My Eyes I* (2022), composed of swirling

toffee-colored wind and dust—mountains of dust—and beneath that, a conspicuously crimson red. The painting’s forms move toward and away from one another, and from the painting’s surface and substrate, abutting and overlapping, occluding and revealing—and expressing, Wang hopes, “struggle, reconciliation, and a self-created sense of security.” Words that could just as easily apply to personal memory as to world history, I think, just as the







## Kaifan Wang

ringing in my ears gives way to a noise. Wang looks to have heard it as well, and we both glance outside. A songbird has landed on the fourth-floor window ledge and is now settling itself down to observe the street below.

Memory and experience aren't limited to the personal in Wang's painting. "Stories are a way that I want people to understand my art," he says. "It's not only the pictures that are important, but what is in the distance, behind them." For his recent show at Vienna's Commune Gallery, *Bull Washer*—including video works; Wang makes sculpture too—the artist searched for local stories. But he didn't look to the usual places, like Freud's old address. Rather, he gazed outward, to the folk tales of the countryside.

One such story he found originates with Europe's 16th-century *Bauernkrieg*, or Farmer's War. Back then, Salzburg was under threat, besieged by an enemy looking to starve its inhabitants. Food was scarce, and there was only one bull left in the city's fortress. Something needed to be done. So, clever as they were, the Salzburgers came up with a strategy: each day, they painted the animal anew and showed it off, giving their enemy the impression of plenty. Eventually, the foreign army lost patience and went away, and the people of Salzburg celebrated by giving the bull a good wash in the Salzach river.

So goes one of the tales behind the cycle. The defensive action of painting the bovine is followed by the soft act of washing; a hard line is drawn, only for it to be later, lovingly, washed away. "What, for me, is interesting is how can I control a soft material, like a sponge, to make hard lines," Wang says of the movements in the *Bull Washer* series—opposed in the story, reconciled in the painting. Like his earlier works, the calligraphy-like marks still cohere around forms that fall out as others fall in, that come together

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STARING THE WHITE RIVER FLOWING THROUGH ITS ARCHES, 2024  
Oil, oil stick, acrylic on canvas, 190 × 240 cm

and apart. But now there is more water in the pigment, and the edges have softened—in fact, the lines are dripping, just like the bull in the river, running not only with paint but with memories too.

But these canals of color are much more discreet than those of, say, Cy Twombly's bloody *Bacchus* (2006–08) series, a reference of Wang's, as are the cows in the work of the great sinner Francis Bacon. And I see, amidst the sweeping lines that call back to the rigor of his early calligraphy classes, suggestions of Cecily Brown. "I'm connecting all of these references together to create my own stories," Wang says, smiling as he tells me of further designs or coincidences: the cow's sacred place in Hare Krishna, the fact that Hohhot is China's milk capital.





Wang, merging memory and story, history and biography, milk and dust, is looking in and looking out

Installation view of *Bull Washer* at Commune Gallery, Vienna, 2024

Right: PINK PIMPLE, 2022  
Oil, oil stick, acrylic on canvas, 160 × 120 cm

I comment on the paintings' surfaces and layers, noting how they seem to mark, like the drips, different times, and the artist shares that he recently visited the Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi for the first time. At dusk, a choir practiced their *passaggi* as Wang wandered beneath the works of such masters as Cimabue and Giotto, gradually noticing the frescoes' different histories—how even a single image might be reworked centuries later in places that have fallen away. Applied to Wang's painting, these layers build their own history, right up to the surface, where the artist will sometimes use a sponge to enclose the painting with a patchy patina. "I think the different times make the work richer," Wang says. "Everything's mixing together."

Kaifan Wang, merging memory and story, history and biography, milk and dust, is looking in and looking out. He's working in the distance, in the fresh air. So it makes sense to me when he says he's cautious of fashion. "I don't want people to say things like, 'This painting was last year,'" he says, and we both laugh. Just then, I hear ringing that sounds to be coming from outside. The songbird is gone, and there is no other sign. I look to Wang to see if he's heard the noise—and it appears he has. Perhaps it came from across the bridge.

Kaifan Wang's solo show at Gnyp Gallery, Berlin, will open April 26. His exhibition at Blum Gallery, LA, will open mid-November.

