

## Sherry Buchanan talks to writer, artist and Nobel laureate Gao Xingjian in his Paris studio

### At what age did you start to draw?

Very young. My mother gave me a diary when I was eight that triggered my desire to write. Like all children, I also drew. When I was 10, I received a beautifully bound notebook for my birthday from my uncle; the pages were blank, without any lines, so I could write and draw. The first book I wrote and illustrated was a child's fantasy story.

### Do you still have any of your early drawings?

My first book, everything has disappeared. The police confiscated many things. In China a lot was destroyed.

### Where did you first study art?

I started painting seriously when I was in high school. My family at the time was in Nanjing. It was after 1949 and China was already Communist. My high school was one of the oldest in China. It was founded by American missionaries and had a fantastic library. I was lucky to have the artist Yun Zongying as an art teacher; he was a nationally recognised painter, one of the best of his generation, who had studied Western-style painting at the Fine Arts Academy in Nanjing. He painted watercolours and portraits and landscapes in oil. Because he was a teacher, he was relatively free to paint. At 13, I secretly started to paint in oil at home.

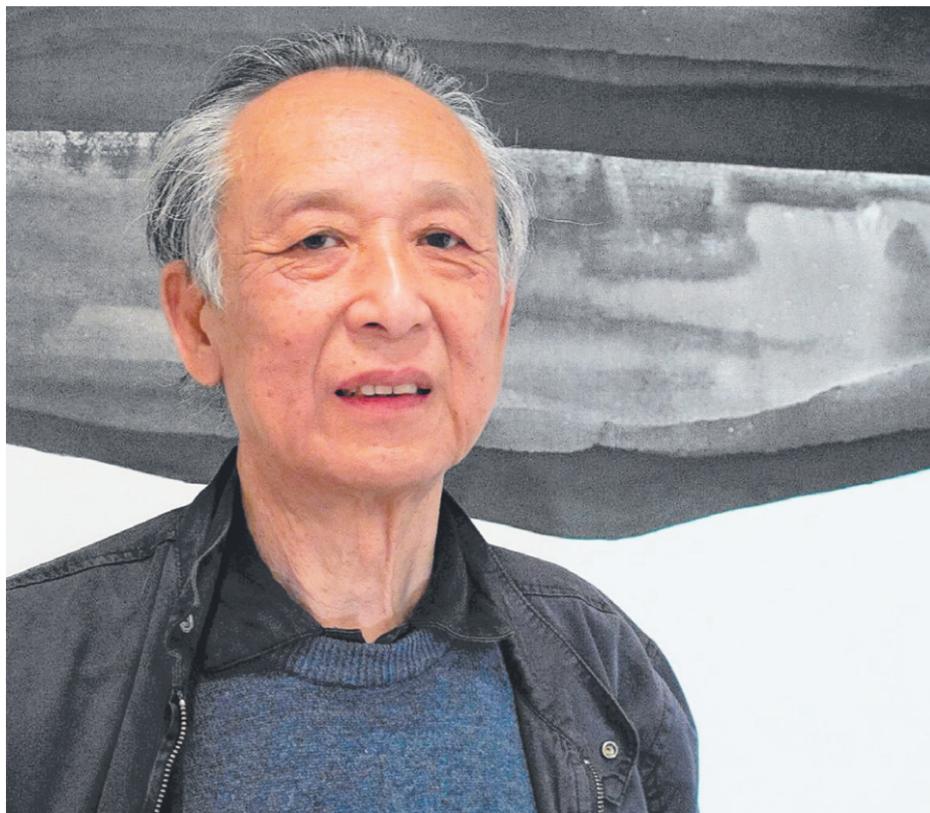
### How did you discover photography during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76)?

During my university years in Beijing, I continued to draw and paint. After 1966, I stopped everything. Everything became dangerous. All paintings were political; landscapes and portraits were considered bourgeois. My family destroyed a lot during this time. My violin, our Beethoven records, in fact we smashed our record collection. Every night we cycled around the streets, throwing the broken pieces into different garbage bins. Imagine how great our feeling of terror was! I did start photography [during the Revolution]. After five years in a re-education camp, I escaped and worked as a teacher in a remote village in the mountainous region of Anhui province (east of Nanjing). I wanted to be free from the mutual surveillance in the camp. My only pleasure was photography. I bought old reels of film; they were being sold by the kilo very cheaply. I had a makeshift darkroom and made my own prints. I studied the effects of light. As a nature lover, I took long hikes through the mountains. I photographed landscapes in black and white. [Unlike painting], it wasn't dangerous. I gave the photographs to the villagers, who were delighted.

### When did you start painting again?

At the end of the Cultural Revolution. With Deng Xiaoping's liberal policies, artistic activities resumed. I was rehabilitated and transferred back to Beijing. I worked as a translator for *Chine en Construction*, a monthly propaganda magazine. In my free time, I started painting in secret. I painted with ink, using the medium in the same way as watercolours.

In 1978, I was part of the first official Chinese delegation to France. It was the first time I had left China. When I visited the Louvre and the Pompidou Centre, I actually saw the [European] masters I had only seen reproduced in books. I realised there was no comparison between European oil paintings and the oil paintings in China. My next visit to Europe was to Italy in 1979 as translator for the Chinese artists on the delegation. This is when I had my painting crisis. What can I paint that will be good? I gave this serious thought. I didn't have access to the quality of oil paints



# VISION BORN IN INK



Gao Xingjian, top; works by Gao, *Enchantment* (2011), above left, and *The End of the World* (2006), above right

available in Europe. I didn't want to follow art fashions. To go back to traditional Chinese ink painting was boring. There was no real creativity. Everything was codified and I would have to become an apprentice. I knew ink. I would return to ink but in a different way. This would be my creation as a painter.

### When did you have your first exhibition of ink paintings?

At the beginning of the 1980s, I was offered a position as a playwright with the People's Art Theatre in Beijing. I had my own room [to live in]. It was a very big room, all to myself. I thought: "I have the space. I have the time. I will write and I will paint." In 1985, I had the first exhibition of my ink paintings at the Theatre with artists who designed theatre masks. The exhibition was not official. But the director of the Theatre agreed to it. Cultural policy was relatively liberal that year. Since I was well-known because of my dissent, the press covered the exhibition immediately. And to my surprise, foreign diplomats bought some paintings. I had press coverage and I had buyers: my painting career was launched!

### What about the "miracle" in Berlin?

The next chance event took place a few months later. I was invited to Berlin as a writer and brought some rolled paintings as gifts. As I was staying in a large apartment, I hung the

paintings up with thumbtacks and invited my hosts. "Oh, you are an artist? We should have an exhibition for you," said Barbara Richter, one of my hosts. For me, their encouragement was incredible. Thanks to her persistence, the director of the Kunstlerhaus suggested organising an exhibition before my return to China. But the venue was vast and my paintings were small! "You have the space to paint some larger ones," Barbara said. I didn't have my materials with me. "There is a daily Lufthansa flight from Berlin to Beijing return," she insisted. Friends in Beijing packed my brushes and inks. I finished about thirty large ink paintings in time for the exhibition. Back in China, my situation was becoming more and more difficult. I was a target of the Purge Spiritual Pollution Campaign. I couldn't do anything. Banned. My work was completely censored. That is when I thought of going to Germany. I wasn't free, however, to leave China; [after several official interventions] I left.

### How did exile affect your painting?

I chose to live in Paris. I wanted total freedom, I wanted to create, which meant no job. I was soon able to live from selling my work. I started experimenting in 1990 with ink on canvas. It took time before I was able to produce the effects I was looking for. After many trials, in 1991, I started working with larger canvases.

When I arrived in France, the galleries said it was impossible to classify my work. I resisted. The pressure [from the market] is all-invasive. I painted without thinking about exhibiting. I painted for my own pleasure, in defiance of this oppression, in defiance of any [art] fashion. My aim is to create something that hasn't been done. Renewal was difficult in figurative art and there was not much that was new in abstract art. We are bored by it. One must strive to create a new meaning [for painting], a meaning that makes us dream, that induces meditation. Affirmation is what real creation is about. I am a perfectionist. That is what drives me. I can work non-stop for 10 hours until three o'clock in the morning, although less now because of my health.

### How do your paintings break new ground?

One must follow the intensity of the ink. That's me. I have found a way to control ink unknown in the Chinese painting tradition. That tradition is based on calligraphy, on the linear line. [In my painting] the line disappears. Oils are about space, about the *geste*. When I worked in oil it was all about colour, now it is about light. The [improvised] darkroom [in the village in Anhui] taught me that. I know how light is controlled.

### Is painting the ultimate freedom?

I distance myself from words; the image speaks. It is not an illustration. It is an inner vision; the painting is born spontaneously, especially when I paint to music. I prepare my state of mind. I think of nothing else. I choose my favourite "records". Bach creates a sustainable tension. Beethoven's music is too authoritarian, it imposes itself, so it doesn't suit my work. There are others, especially Alfred Schnittke's music and Henryk Gorecki's *Third Symphony*. A single piece of music usually accompanies the creation of one painting; a vision is born.

### Are you conscious of your place in art history?

I am very conscious of wanting to free myself from the *chinoiserie* label.

### Do you think of yourself as a dissident?

The media has labelled me a dissident. The dissident label is limiting. Dissidence is about politics. For me, art goes beyond politics. I am simply a citizen of the world. That is what defines me.

Extract from **Gao Xingjian: Painter of the Soul** by Daniel Bergez (Asia Ink), out early next month.

**Gao Xingjian** was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2000. **Sherry Buchanan** is a publisher and author who lives in London. She served with *The Wall Street Journal* and *The International Herald Tribune* in the US, Europe and Asia.