

Nobel laureate Gao Xingjian's dreamscapes charm Frenchman

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Nobel laureate Gao Xingjian is widely feted for his writings, but it is his ink-wash paintings that charmed Parisian art and literary critic Daniel Bergez (right) to devote a tome to it.



um between figurative and abstract painting."

The Frenchman later came to know Gao personally through interviews and feature articles he penned of the acclaimed author, who now lives in Paris.

Keen to share his passion for Gao's ink-wash work and draw more attention to the

The book, Gao Xingjian:

Painter Of The Soul, offers a mesmerising gallery of ink-wash works that illustrates the different techniques, themes and periods in Gao's extensive body of work.

The recently published book, however, is more than just a monochrome beauty.

Bergez, 63, who is a professor of French literature at the prestigious Parisian public high school Lycee Henri IV, plumbed the depths of Gao's works in brush and pen to surface the profound harmony between his writings and paintings.

The result: a visually sumptuous read that is erudite yet approachable.

Bergez first learnt of Gao in 2000 when the consummate artist, who is also a film-maker, won the Nobel Prize for Literature.

The China-born artist, whose outspoken writing is banned in his country of birth, is famed for works such as the epic novel of self-discovery Soul Mountain (1989) and absurdist drama Bus Stop (1983).

In the same year, Bergez chanced upon Gao's paintings in a magazine.

He says in an e-mail interview: "I was immediately seduced, even spellbound, by the enigmatic and suggestive power (of Gao's paintings) and by their profound dream-like quality.

"Being a painter myself, I realised there and then that Gao had mastered a unique ink-wash technique and had developed an original and exceptional equilibri-

Nobel laureate's painterly pursuit, he proposed the book idea to French publisher Editions du Seuil. He spent two months last year writing it.

The English-language version is published by Asia Ink and translated by Sherry Buchanan. It includes an interview with Gao by Buchanan.

Bergez says a challenge he faced when writing the book was making sure he did not over-simplify Gao's richly layered painting practice. As such, the book delves into the myriad influences on Gao's work, including the artist's use of Eastern and Western aesthetics, and desire to return to tradition.

Bergez also side-stepped the pitfall by choosing to illuminate the paintings with quotes from Gao's literary works such as Soul Mountain, which he found to be "very revealing" of the artist's creative universe.

He says: "This book is a way to bring Gao's magnificent pictorial work to a larger audience. It was also a way to immerse myself in his creation.

I took on the task with great enjoyment."

Gao Xingjian: Painter Of The Soul is available at \$85.60 from Books Kinokuniya at Ngee Ann City.



PAINTINGS HIGHLIGHTED IN GAO XINGJIAN: PAINTER OF THE SOUL



PHOTOS: ASIA INK, DANIEL BERGEZ, GAO XINGJIAN

The End Of The World, 2006 (above)

The notion of the self which preoccupies Gao's writings is present in his paintings as semi-abstract figures. His human sketches, while lacking personalised features, are rendered with delicate expression and at once unique, anonymous and universal, hovering between figuration and abstract ideas. The motif underscores the enduring metaphysical quest and search for man's destiny in his art. This work stands out for his use of perspective, which he usually eschews, to heighten pictorial instability and tension. The swathe of ink that forms the top-half of the painting inhabits a frontal, vertical plane while the bottom half, with diminishing figures scattered across a space without boundaries, conjures a horizontal plane.

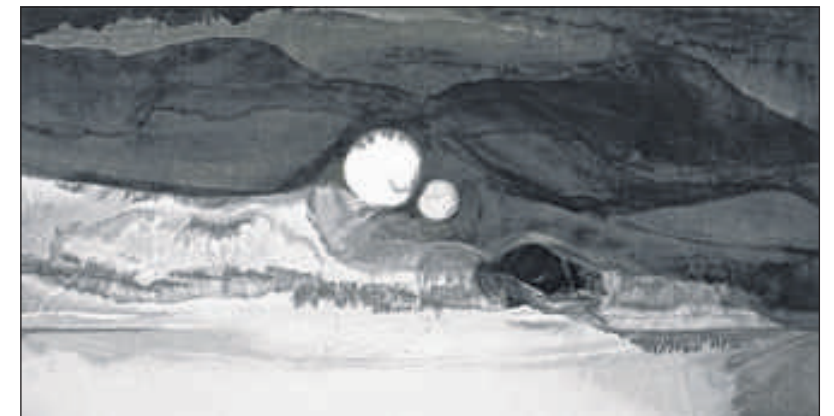
Portrait Of A Bird, 1999 (right)

Gao's paintings often blur the distinction between subject and object, causing the mind's eye to flutter between the two. This painting embodies the tension in his work. The glassy eye appears one moment to be the viewer's own reflection with an arched eyebrow and in the next moment, as belonging to a bird with a curved beak. Tension pulses between the viewer's eye as the subject and the painted eye as the object.



Dream Mountain, 2005 (above)

Gao makes little distinction between the real and imaginary worlds and mines the ever-changing images in his dream-like inner world when he paints. Dreams often form part of the titles of his works. The deeply personal images in his paintings embody a universal quality that allows the works to transcend the artist's experience and resonate with each viewer in distinct and intimate ways.



Eclipse, 1999 (above)

Gao has said in an interview with Bergez that in his art, shapes such as a splash or a dot are not merely geometric forms but triggers for emotions. The circle recurs in his paintings. At times, it is cocooned in swathes of dark wash, occasionally it is split, and in other instances, it is multiplied in a single work. This painting is an example of how shapes such as the circle function as versatile building blocks of grammar in his artistic vernacular.