

# Vibe

Sunday

A16

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## X marks the spot

For 22 years, one of China's leading abstract painters Ding Yi has been making X marks and + plus signs — nothing else — inventing a daring new “meaningless” language to describe modern life. Liu Xiaolin decodes the x-treme art.

**E**ntering Ding Yi's studio is like plunging into a world of crosses, mesmerized by “X”s and “+”s in dense formations on large-scale vibrantly colored canvases.

There's not a figure or curve to be seen, Ding has reduced the world to simple “meaningless” elemental geometric code, creating a language of pulsating “data” flows and abstraction that speaks to the modern age.

Ding was part of China's New Wave Contemporary Art Movement of the mid-1980s and he was one of the 16 young artists who founded the artists' hub at 50 Moganshan Rd, now called M50, in 1986.

At first Ding's work — “X”s “X”s everywhere — shocked everyone: it was among the most defiant statements of the time. But today he's so popular that his “X”s appear on designer Hermes silk scarves and designers scramble to collaborate with him (but his heart is painting).

In his studio stands a towering model of “The Information Age,” a steel sculpture (by Ding and his Shanghai Institute of Visual Arts students) at the World Expo. It's covered with huge crosses, long and short, that punch outward like swords in various directions. There's a six-meter-high abstract Formica shelf in the center of the room, it's covered in shapes like strange stones from Taihu Lake and engraved with “X”s — it's a collaboration with the US home furnishings and surface materials manufacturer Formica. But collaborations are relatively few: painting is his work.

On the walls hang the famous huge x canvases; since 1988 all have been titled “Appearance of Crosses,” in many sizes, patterns, textures, materials and colors, even Scottish tartan and fluorescent paint. No title word of “meaning” gives viewers a hint. All are regimented and reduce the world to “X”s; none has “meaning” in the traditional sense. More are stacked in the corner of the studio at M50 on Suzhou Creek, a former textile warehouse.

Ding Yi, famed for his “cross-stitching,” is one of China's earliest and most influential contemporary artists; his works have been exhibited and collected worldwide. He first drew wide attention at the 1993 Venice Biennale, when his works were stunning examples of China's abstract art at the time.

Today his works sell for an average of 1 million yuan (US\$149,466), he said. The highest

price at an auction was on October 4 in Hong Kong. A work (3 x 3 cm) from 2005 fetched HK\$8.6 million (US\$1.11 million).

Ding has been busy: He gives lectures on his life and contemporary art and he teaches.

Since 2001, Ding has exhibited at Art Basel in Switzerland, one of the world's premier shows. In May two of his works were exhibited in Sino-Belgium art exchange show themed “The State of Things” in China Art Museum in Beijing. A 1972 work was shown in a retrospective of 30 years of contemporary Chinese art in Shanghai Minsheng Art Museum.

Ding is planning his third solo exhibition in Shanghai Art Museum next year (earlier shows in 1994 and 1997).

### Bored by conformity

In the mid-1980s Ding was a forerunner in China's New Wave Art Movement, boldly going where others had not considered treading.

“Doesn't ‘forerunner’ refer to those who passed away?” joked Ding whose work is very much alive.

He sat down for a chat with Shanghai Daily in his studio.

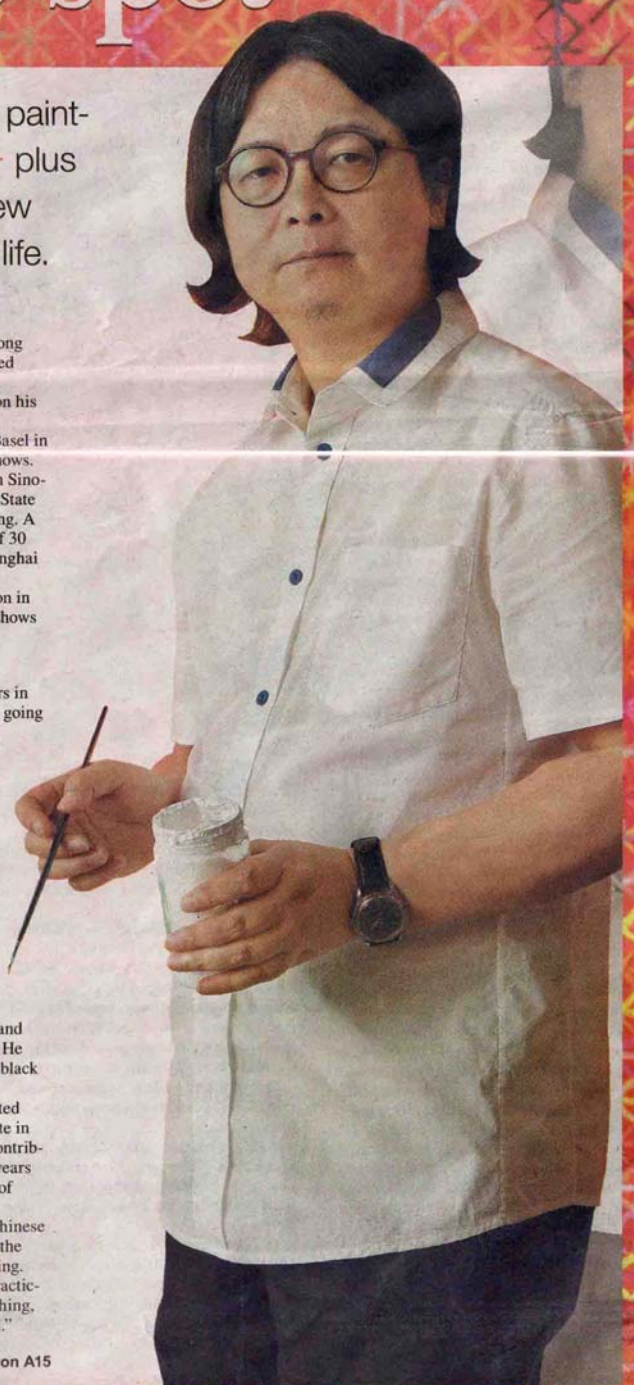
“I appreciate the approval and feel much honored. But now it's like walking carefully on ice. I am working very hard to live up to it. After all, art matters most.”

Unlike his more personally flamboyant contemporaries, 48-year-old Ding is rather restrained and keeps a low-profile. He looks more like a scholar with hair to the nape of the neck, a beard and black eyeglasses with big circular frames. He dresses simply in a casual white shirt and black trousers.

Born in Shanghai in 1962, Ding graduated from the Shanghai Arts and Crafts Institute in 1983 (his work in printing and graphics contributed greatly to his later works) and three years later studied at the Fine Arts Department of Shanghai University.

At that time he majored in traditional Chinese painting, but he quickly became bored by the conformity of literati and landscape painting.

“We could spend weeks learning and practicing various brushwork for one particular thing, like rocks,” Ding recalled. “It's pretty dull.”



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# Master takes art to X-tremes

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In Ding's opinion, over thousands of years traditional Chinese painting has formed its own system of imagery so unbreakable that it becomes "routinism." He could see no breakthrough in that field and quickly abandoned it.

By that time it was the middle of the New Wave Art Movement (1985-89), a revolutionary period. Chinese artists broke the shackles of traditional artistic concepts and the socialistic realism of the "cultural revolution" (1966-76) and embraced Western modern arts with passion. They tried every possible style of Western modern art to express individualism, their personal emotions and ideas.

Ding was attracted by the language of modern abstract art, so he started to learn the Paris school himself, as access to materials and teachers was limited. Unlike other artists who focused on emotional expression, he was looking for his own stable artistic language, a language that speaks less about personal feelings and more about art itself.

"We Chinese are used to enduring things with certain meanings, which gradually become stereotypes," Ding explained. "It is time for a change."

"I knew if I wanted to make a breakthrough, I had to come up with something different from the mainstream. So I tried to paint something simple, indifferent and rational."

"I hope people can focus on the color, stroke and structure of the painting rather than the meaning behind it. Only when people forget about the so-called meanings can they finally become open to new touches from the pictures," said Ding.

In this way, Ding borrowed the "cross" pattern from printing, and it would become his signature. During his three years as a package designer in a toy factory before college he became fascinated by x and +, the simple meaningless marks used to ensure precise placement of text on page by marking + on corners.

## Viewers shocked

In 1988, Ding produced his first work in the ongoing series "Appearance of Crosses." Small black crosses were precisely painted on the canvas consisting of three vertical columns of color, red, yellow and blue. It appears to have been printed and Ding used ruler, masking tape and draftsman's instruments to make the drawing precise.

When Ding's professor and classmates saw his work, they were shocked and dismayed. "They found it unacceptable and hard to understand," said Ding who was pleased with the impact and the criticism.

"I knew I had succeeded," Ding recalled, with a grin. "I was walking ahead of the times."

For the next 22 years, Ding has been shaping his own kingdom of crosses. He tried various materials and fabrics, such as corrugated paper, linen, paperboard, water paper, tartan and check gingham. He put aside the ruler and has been painting with a freer hand with pencils, ballpoint pens, chalk, marking pens, watercolor, charcoal, oil paint and acrylics.

Whatever adventures he undertakes, he always uses crosses. Insisting on simplicity and rationalism, he titled all his works "Appearance of Crosses," adding the year and a serial number "to erase every possible hint of existing meaning."

In his current works, Ding has added fluorescent colors, weaving complexity and



## What critics say:

Lorenz Helbling, owner of ShanghaiART Gallery:

"Wu Guangzhong, the grand old master of modern Chinese art, stated that Chinese art often looks almost abstract. But, like kites in the sky, he says, there has always been a string that binds it to the Earth, to a recognizable object. Ding Yi's paintings are totally abstract, kites that fly without a string, beautiful, yet powerful."

Hans Ulrich Obrist, a Swiss contemporary art curator, critic and art historian:

"In revealing the cacophonous complexity of the contemporary urban experience, the artist forges an order amidst the chaos. And this is perhaps what is most inspiring: Ding Yi's unique practice offers a model for negotiating our own experience of the present."

Ding Yi in his studio on Moganshan Road. — Gao Jianping

At first, Ding hesitated, even decided to decline since he worried that he would not have 100 percent freedom in creating the design.

"There's no way I would compromise or change my style to cater to any brand. I wouldn't consider it," he said.

Then the fashion house invited him on a five-day trip to Paris where he saw Hermes' main store, studio, museum and scarf workshops in Lyon. Hermes' design manager drew a square 88.5cm x 88.5cm on a piece of paper, the exact size of its scarf. Inside in large letters he wrote "Freedom."

Ding agreed. For three months he worked virtually nonstop on the scarf, completing his work in February 2007 with "The Rhythm of China," a dark-colored work of crosses, conveying his interpretation of the changing city.

In September, the scarf, together with another 45 historic scarves, was showcased as a retrospective finale to "The Tale of Silk" at the Shanghai Art Museum.

The scarf is only one of Ding's successful crossovers, including crossover into sculpture and furniture.

"My main focus is and will always be painting," he said.

## Born to paint

Ding grew up in a working class neighborhood of Yangpu District. His apartment was across from the plaza where he watched painters at work on murals; and near the Yangpu Cinema where they painted movie posters.

His mother was a kindergarten teacher. Ding's father used to work in a department store. His addiction to art and painting was triggered by his father, who liked to make copies of illustrations in the spare time. In his spare time he made copies of comic books with watercolors he bought with saved pocket money. He even colored the black-and-white photos he discovered at home — his parents were not pleased.

"At that time, I had a feeling in my gut that I had to do something related to art in

the future," Ding recalled. Since then, all his decisions were about painting.

In 1986, he resolutely resigned from the toy factory job designing packages and applied to the fine arts department of Shanghai University. His parents were strongly opposed, thinking he was risking his future.

When he graduated four years later, he decided to be a teacher at the Shanghai Arts and Crafts Institute because the job gave him lots of opportunities and time to draw.

Today, Ding teaches in the Shanghai Institute of Visual Art, but spends most of the time, day and night and often holidays, in his world of crosses. He jokes that he's "the hardest-working creator."

But the creator also likes to visit art shows and vacation with his family. He also runs a furniture store near his studio, where he displays his favorite Art Deco furniture.

Ding has slowed down his pace of creation and now spends more time on detail, often changing every work.

"The biggest challenge is how to make new breakthroughs," he said. "And I'm experimenting with every possibility to find the answer."



One of Ding's sculptures: the 8-meter-high "Age of Information" in front of the Expo Center.