



Beyond the Canvas: The Cultural and Institutional Evolution of Mixed-Media Painting in China (1985-2010)

Ouyang Nina^{1*} and Parichart Kluensuwan²

¹ Ph.D. Candidate, Semiotics and Cultural Studies Program, Academy of Arts and Philosophy, Shinawatra University, Bangkok, Thailand

² Ph.D. Assistant Professor, Semiotics and Cultural Studies Program, Academy of Arts and Philosophy, Shinawatra University, Bangkok, Thailand

^{1*} E-mail: 314149762@qq.com, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-4384-3370>

² E-mail: parichart.k@siu.ac.th, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-2050-4604>

Received 18/02/2025

Revised 10/03/2025

Accepted 20/04/2025

Abstract

Background and Aim: The emergence of mixed-media painting in China following the "85-New Wave" (1985–2010) marked a significant shift in contemporary artistic practices. This study examines how the adoption of mixed-media painting reflects broader cultural, political, and institutional transformations in China. It explores the movement's evolution from an experimental art form to an established practice within the Chinese art system.

Materials and Methods: Using a qualitative approach, this research analyzes archival records, scholarly articles, and exhibition histories, complemented by in-depth interviews with six prominent artists. A formal analysis of key artworks is conducted to trace stylistic and conceptual developments, categorizing this evolution into three phases: early experimentation (1985–1987), conceptual rationalization (1987–1989), and institutional integration (1989–2010).

Results: The findings reveal that mixed-media painting initially served as a tool for artistic resistance, incorporating Western avant-garde techniques to challenge traditional Chinese aesthetics. By the late 1980s, it became a medium for socio-political commentary, utilizing new materials and conceptual strategies. Post-1989, mixed-media art gradually entered the mainstream, culminating in its formal recognition by the China Artists Association in 2012. The study highlights the dual role of mixed media as an agent of artistic innovation and a vehicle for negotiating state-sanctioned artistic boundaries.

Conclusion: This study contributes to the understanding of how mixed-media painting facilitated artistic pluralism in China while navigating the constraints of political and institutional forces. By documenting its historical trajectory and impact, the research underscores the significance of mixed media in shaping contemporary Chinese art. Future studies should explore cross-cultural comparisons, digital influences, and the evolving institutional frameworks that continue to shape mixed-media practices globally.

Keywords: Mixed-media Painting; "85-New Wave"; Art concepts; Art Movement

Introduction

The "85-New Wave" is widely regarded as China's first contemporary art movement that actively challenged tradition, authority, and established artistic conventions. Rooted in the intellectual currents of China's *New Enlightenment* and influenced by Western modern art, this movement rejected the single-function, politically driven artistic thought of the past. Instead, it embraced experimental and conceptual approaches, profoundly reshaping Chinese art over the past three decades (Wang, 2013). On May 20, 1983, Sen Dada's exhibition *Dead Sun* (Figure 1) and his public declaration that "*Art is not the megaphone of politics*" (Wang, 2015) are considered pivotal moments that catalyzed the "85-New Wave". This movement not only revolutionized artistic expression but also engaged in broader intellectual and cultural discourse, influencing literature, philosophy, and political thought.



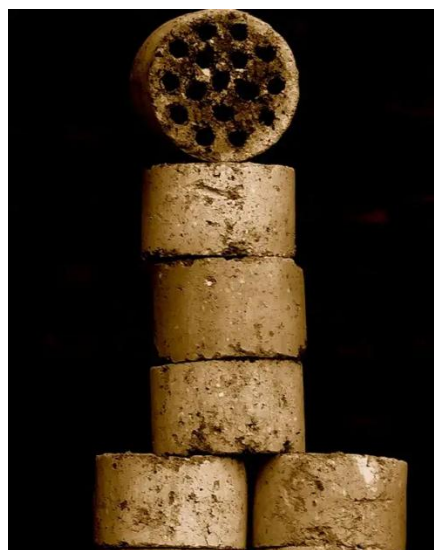


Figure 1 Dead Sun, Sen Dada, 1983

Note: <https://www.zhihu.com/question/264046867/answer/276162201>

During this period, mixed-media art emerged as a key experimental approach, fundamentally different from previous Chinese artistic traditions (Song, 2018). It introduced two major shifts: (1) the integration of diverse materials, expanding the formal language of painting, and (2) the exploration of new thematic and conceptual dimensions beyond the limitations of single-medium works. While mixed-media techniques had long been established in Western modern and postmodern art, particularly in Cubism and Dada, their adoption in China was part of a larger transformation in artistic practice. Notably, Pablo Picasso's *Still Life with Chair* (1912) (Figure 2), often considered one of the first true mixed-media artworks, exemplified the collage and assemblage techniques that later influenced Chinese artists (Gao, 1997).



Figure 2 Still Life with Chair, Pablo Picasso, 1912

Note: https://www.sohu.com/a/827868041_122093735

The development of Mixed Media Art in China began under the influence of Western modern art. Especially, in 1985, Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008) held two solo exhibitions in Beijing and Lhasa, China, which had a huge impact on the Chinese art circle, which was in the process of brewing a visual and ideological revolution, and directly promoted the development of "85-New Wave". His installation works brought Mixed Media Arts into the Chinese people's vision and broadened the boundaries of artistic language (Lv, 2012). Facing Rauschenberg's exhibition, Chinese contemporary great artist Huang

Yongping once said bluntly, "(Rauschenberg's) art can be in any medium, anywhere, for any purpose and in any destination." (Wu, 2003)

From Huang Yongping's words, it seems that Mixed Media Art was full of possibilities for them at that time (Wu, 2003). The first Mixed Media Art in China that has a contemporary artistic consciousness and has entered the field of the artistic authority system is the Dead Sun mentioned above (Wang, 2013). Sen Dada placed this "ready-made" artwork—which was quite avant-garde at that time—in the official exhibition, and the event Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) put Fountain (1917, Figure 3) in the exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists, although it is not in the same era, it has a similar effect.



Figure 3 Fountain, Marcel Duchamp, 1917

Note: https://k.sina.cn/article_1897261013_p7115e7d5027003e6x.html

At that time, many artistic groups created by Mixed Media blossomed and sprouted quietly in China. In the process of artists exploring and advancing, they gradually developed unique forms of expression, which may sensitively reflect the vision, concept, and life of that era.

Objectives

1. To examine how the "85-New Wave" influenced the adoption of mixed-media painting in China;
2. To explore mixed-media painting as a medium for artistic experimentation and social critique;
3. To extract "meta-pictures" of Chinese contemporary mixed media about the historical, cultural, and social value.

Literature Review

The literature review provides a comprehensive examination of existing scholarly works and research relevant to the study's focus theoretical reviews focus on organizing and analyzing the development context and limitations of existing theoretical systems; method reviews evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of research methods and technologies in a certain field and their application scenarios; topic reviews focus on specific research topics, summarizing research content and development trends; case reviews reveal practical experience and problems by analyzing typical cases; historical reviews sort out the historical evolution and key nodes of the research field.

1. History of "85-New Wave"

"85-New Wave" is a series of ideological trends and visual innovation movements of young artists from the early 1980s until the end of 1989, marked by anti-traditional contemporary art concepts and



creative techniques. Mixed-media art entered China during this period and has since taken an important part in exhibitions. They represent the new characteristics of Chinese art since the New Enlightenment and after the Reform and Opening-up, and also lay the foundation for the diversified development of contemporary art.

In the early days, it was mainly some art magazines that paid attention to the art movement of the "85-New Wave" and wrote treatises and reviews. The type of treatises was mainly reportage, which provided a substantial body of literature for later thought or art-historical research. From 1985 to 1989, art magazines such as "Art Before the Explanation. Ideological Trend", "Art News of China", "Art of Jiangsu", and "Art Magazine" became important mouthpieces for reporting the "85-New Wave" art. Artists also publish manuscripts in these publications to explain their creative concepts (Tang, 2007).

2. Steady Development of "85-New Wave" Art Culture

During the 85-New Wave Art period, artists and critics became more deeply engaged with contemporary art, aiming to better understand and support it. In 1991, Gao Minglu made a significant contribution to this effort with his book "Chinese Contemporary Art History 1985-1986." He carefully examined the development of Chinese art before and after the "85-New Wave" movement, emphasizing the importance of historical context in shaping contemporary artistic expression.

After sorting out the above and then adding some appreciative texts, it has positive historical value (Lv & Yi, 1992). The Junction Point of Tradition and Trend" in "Art Research" in 1990, discusses the changes of artistic concepts in that era from the perspective of tradition and trend. The research results of this period are not only conducive to the development and improvement of the "85-New Wave" art culture. (Yi, 1990).

3. Transformation of the "85-New Wave"

After the 20th century, the research and analysis of the "85-New Wave" in the art circle started from the source, that is, Western modernist art, focusing on the study of how Western artistic concepts spread and developed in China, and their important influences. In 2004, "Literature and Art Studies" published Shao Hong's monograph, "The Western Art History Spread Eastward for a Hundred Years", the main content of which was the exploration of Western art history. At the same time, the works represented by Gao Minglu's Wall: History and Boundary of Chinese Contemporary Art (Gao, 1997) and Lv Peng and Yi Dan's literary book Chinese Art History Since 1979 began to reflect the "85-New Wave" global observation (Lv & Yi, 1992).

Since then, the research on the "85-New Wave" has shown a trend of flourishing, many traditional themes are still being brought up again, and the angles of discussion have also become diverse. In 2014, Yin Xing published "Talking about the Changes in the Chinese Painting Art Market Since the 85-New Wave Art", and began to study the influence of the "85-New Wave" art from the perspective of the art market (Yin, 2014); in 2015, Wang Lin's "Individuality, Anti-tradition and Re-construction Folk Culture—Re-thinking of 85-New Wave Art", from the perspective of culture and folk, which is the result of continuous deepening of research and open thinking in recent years (Wang, 2015).

4. Research on mixed-media art

In China, research papers on the new genre of mixed-media painting are simply sorted out. First, the reference events are repeated, and second, the artists mentioned are the same. These two points make the overall ideas of these reference papers similar.

The Art Committee for Mixed-Media Painting and Preservation and Restoration of Art Works of the China Artists Association was established on July 9, 2010, marking the legal status of mixed-media painting, which was officially recognized. In "Returning to Art Itself - 2017 Chongqing Annual Meeting of the Art Committee of Mixed-media Painting". In summary, after continuous research and exploration, the domestic research on "comprehensive materials" has a clear creation form and academic concept.

5. Research on "85-new wave", mixed-media art, and paintings

In recent years, research on the "85-New Wave" and mixed-media art has mainly appeared in graduation theses in colleges and universities. For example, in 2012, Lv Zhiqiang's thesis "Research on the



Phenomena of mixed-media in Chinese Contemporary Art" (Lv, 2012), in 2016, in 2018, Song Xiaoyu, who graduated from the China Academy of Art, wrote a dissertation "Self-awareness and Common Fanatical 85-New Wave Art-Exhibition of Chinese Modern Art" (Song, 2018).

The focus of their research is: 1. A comprehensive discussion on the origin of mixed-media creation and the development status of contemporary Chinese mixed-media creation; 2. The social culture, historical environment, artist's thoughts, and emotions arising from modern art. For reference, analyzing the era background of the "85-New Wave", the content and form of the artist's creation, 3. The development of mixed-media art at home and abroad is elaborated in detail. From the perspective of material classification, the mixed-media creation in China since the 1980s is sorted out, and the artistic language and emotional expression in the form of mixed-media application are explored.

6. Summary

The "85-New Wave" Contemporary Art Movement transformed Chinese art by challenging traditions, integrating Western influences, and fostering conceptual experimentation. It expanded artistic boundaries but faced criticism for superficial Western imitations and political constraints. While later commercialization diluted its radical edge, the movement laid the foundation for mixed-media painting's institutional acceptance, shaping China's contemporary art landscape.

Conceptual Framework

This conceptual framework (Figure 4) not only guides the methodological approach but also ensures that the research achieves a deep and nuanced understanding of the history, culture, social value, and flow of images. This integrated analysis ultimately leads to meaningful answers to the Research Questions of the current study, providing insights into the multifaceted role of images in shaping cultural identity and narratives.

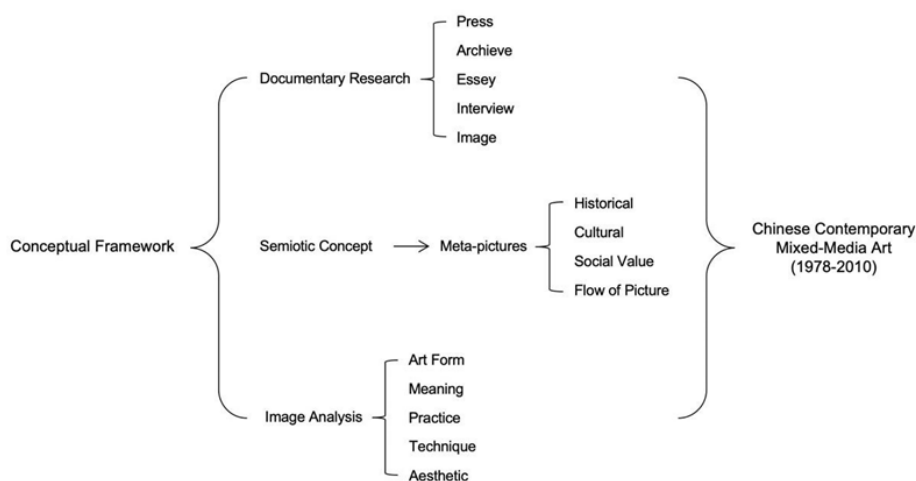


Figure 4 Conceptual Framework
Note: Constructed by the researcher

Methodology

As discussed in Chapter One, this research study focuses on mixed-media easel painting emerging after the "85-New Wave" in China. Despite artists' aspirations to express the vitality of life suppressed during the Cultural Revolution, their creative endeavors remained confined within certain visual parameters. The current study emphasizes how social, cultural, political, and philosophical themes are expressed within these constraints, reflecting the enduring influence of past limitations on contemporary artwork. In this chapter, the research approach, data collection tools and procedures, and the analysis of data are discussed.

1. Documents and Analysis of the Documents

The study relies on documents related to mixed-media art from 1985 to 2010, selected based on their relevance to the research objectives, authenticity, and representativeness. Primary sources include archival records, historical texts, and original artworks, while secondary sources consist of scholarly articles and critical reviews. These materials provide a historical and contextual foundation for understanding the artistic, cultural, and institutional developments of mixed-media painting in China.

2. In-depth Interview and Analysis of the Interview Data

Interviews were conducted with six established mixed-media artists who were key contributors to the post-85-New Wave movement and remain active in the contemporary art scene. These artists were selected based on their participation in major exhibitions, theoretical contributions, and sustained engagement with mixed-media techniques. Open-ended questions allowed them to share insights into their creative processes, artistic influences, and the evolving role of mixed-media art within institutional and cultural frameworks. The responses were systematically analyzed to identify recurring themes and perspectives.

3. Formal Analysis

Through a comprehensive inspection of the collected image materials related to the creation of mixed-media, analyze the differences in formal language between different periods, groups, or individuals, try to find the reasons that affect these differences, and deal with the relationship between their creation with regions, times, and concepts from the perspective of stylistics.

Results

According to the development of mixed-media painting, the development of art after the 85-New Wave, artistic concepts, and official systems, the development of mixed-media painting can be divided into three stages. The first stage, from 1985 to 1987 (the early stage of the 85 New Wave), was the embryonic stage of mixed media. In the second stage, from 1987 to 1989 (the shift of artistic concepts to the first China Modern Art Exhibition), mixed media artists began to seek new directions for contemporary art and develop their theories. In the third stage, from 1989 to 2010, mixed media art was gradually incorporated into the official system.

1. Mixed-media Painting and Early 85-New Wave (1985-1987)

Among the Mixed-Media arts in the early 85-New Wave, a typical trend is to use mixed-media to further develop Chinese traditional paintings, such as ink paintings, lacquer paintings, and murals. This is a natural trend. This is a natural trend. On the one hand, these artists have studied traditional painting for many years before the 85-New Wave". Rather than choosing another art category to cope with the impact, they explore the advantages of traditional painting. Possibility is a more appropriate choice, and it also helps to establish the identity of local artists.

Chen Lide's works contain strong contemporary concepts and are not purely a repetition of tradition or a statement and decoration of materiality. Because of his creative thinking of mixed-media art, he has completely gotten rid of the focus on one material or form of expression. In 1985, "Giant Kuafu" (Figure 5), created by Chen Lide when he participated in the "BYY Painting Party", expresses the traditional Chinese motif "Kuafu Chasing the Sun".

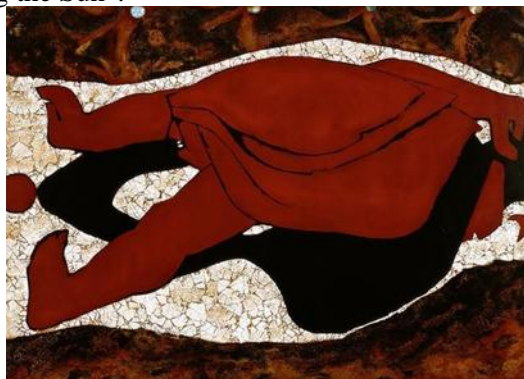


Figure 5 Chen, Lide, Giant Kuafu, 1985

Note: <http://www.zgssshw.cn/content.asp?id=30983>

2. Mixed-media Painting in Rational Turn (1987-1989)

In 1987, many art groups no longer shouted big concepts such as rationality, holiness, and spirituality, but turned to social reality. The problems they faced have changed, and so have their artistic techniques. In

the past, traditional oil painting language was used to express rational themes, but now they are turning to comprehensive expression techniques such as collage, copying, and parody to convey concern and criticism of social issues.

The overall concepts of Zhu Zude, Liu Zhenggang, and Meng Luding are similar: artists should make a separation between the ontological language of art and politics. As mentioned above, this idea is consistent in their creations. A typical example is Meng Luding, who created "In the New World - Adam and Eve" (1985, Figure 6) before proposing the idea of "purifying artistic language". "Revelation" is an easel oil painting, which is classified as a "rational painting" by art critics. In this work, Meng Luding hopes to arrange various formulaic motifs stably and harmoniously, conveying an eternal universal meaning, which is an idealistic pursuit, has a certain religious sublimity, and is completely separated from politics and the pulse of the times in a general sense. In 1988, Meng Luding, who proposed "purified language", created a mixed-media work "Shell" (Figure 7). Through the pure characteristics of the medium, he expressed the free and independent life between paint, canvas, and the painter's system.



Figure 6 Meng Luding, In the New World-Adam and Eve, 1985
Note: https://mengluding.artron.net/works_category_30199



Figure 7 Meng Luding, Graduation Creation Loneliness
Note: https://mengluding.artron.net/works_category_30199

3. Complete Universalization and localization (1989-2010)

The successful holding of the Chinese Modern Art Exhibition at the National Art Museum of China in 1989 symbolized that the 85-New Wave art was gradually approaching the center of the art world from the fringes. The 85 New Wave artists gradually gained a foothold in the Chinese art world, and their purpose changed. They no longer needed to borrow from the West to express their avant-garde stance. Their purpose

was to make Chinese contemporary art relevant to contemporary life. In 2012, the Chinese Artists Association formally established the Mixed-Media Art Committee, marking the complete popularization and officialization of Mixed-Media Art.

For example, in Xue Song's "Conversation with Masters" series, based on his painting language, he reproduces the works of masters in Chinese and foreign art history in his own way, such as Rothko, Mustard Seed Garden Painting Book, the works of masters such as (Figure 8), Matisse (Figure 9) and Mondrian (Figure 10) have taken on new meaning in his thinking.



Figure 8 Xue Song, Mustard Seed Painting Book Part 9, 2012

Note: <http://m-exhibit.artron.net/exhibition-37118.html>



Figure 9 Xue Song, Conversations with Matisse Part One, 2012

Note: <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1587805425554668271&wfr=spider&for=pc>



Figure 10 Xue Song, The Conversation with Mondrian, 2012

Note: <http://www.zhuokearts.com/html/20190424/243240.html>



Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that mixed-media painting played a significant role in the transformation of Chinese contemporary art after the 85-New Wave, aligning with previous research on the movement's artistic and ideological shifts. The study highlights how mixed-media art facilitated the integration of Western modernist concepts while allowing Chinese artists to explore new aesthetic possibilities and socio-political narratives. This aligns with Lv and Yi's (1992) research, which emphasized the role of experimental art in broadening the artistic language of Chinese contemporary painting.

The influence of Western art was a major factor in this transformation. As Hong (2004) noted, the introduction of Western artistic theories and practices into China reshaped artistic discourse, encouraging experimentation with materials and concepts. This study supports that view, showing how artists like Meng Luding and Xue Song incorporated mixed media to redefine traditional Chinese artistic language. However, rather than merely adopting Western styles, Chinese artists localized these influences, blending them with elements of ink painting, calligraphy, and historical symbolism to create a distinctive hybrid aesthetic. This process of localization is also discussed by Wang (2015), who noted that artists during and after the 85-New Wave sought to reconstruct folk traditions while simultaneously engaging with global artistic trends.

Political and social factors also played a crucial role in shaping mixed-media art. Wang (2013) emphasized that the 85-New Wave was driven by a desire for artistic freedom, yet it also had to navigate state-imposed ideological boundaries. The research findings support this, showing how artists initially embraced bold experimentalism but later adapted to more nuanced expressions, especially after 1989, when political pressures intensified. This shift resulted in mixed-media works that carried deeper symbolic meanings while maintaining their innovative form.

One key contribution of this study is its examination of mixed-media art's institutionalization. While early 85-New Wave artists operated on the fringes, the gradual acceptance of mixed-media painting into mainstream art circles, culminating in its recognition by the China Artists Association in 2012, marked a significant transformation. This aligns with previous studies but also highlights an evolution from artistic rebellion to formalized artistic practice, demonstrating mixed-media art's lasting impact on Chinese contemporary art.

Conclusion

The first stage (1985~1987): In 1985, the "85 New Wave" art movement began to sweep across China, and the appropriation and absorption of mixed-media techniques in Western modern art became a norm. Through mixed media, their concepts and works had a profound impact on the creation model of Chinese contemporary art. The second stage (1987~1989): 1987-1989 is generally regarded as a period of artistic concept change when artists began to gradually free themselves from the shackles of collective myths and turned to a deep reflection on reality. The third stage (1989~2010): After 1989, mixed media gradually became a common form of expression, and many artists used mixed media to create works. It was not until 2012 that the China Artists Association incorporated mixed-media art into the official system.

Political and Cultural Context in China: China's political landscape, characterized by periods of ideological shifts and censorship, significantly impacts artistic practice. Artists often navigate nuanced ways to address social and political issues while adhering to censorship regulations.

Influence of Western Art: The influence of Western art on Chinese artists is undeniable, shaping the evolution of mixed-media art in the country. Exposure to Western artistic movements, such as Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, and Postmodernism, has led to a fusion of Eastern and Western artistic elements in Chinese mixed-media art.

Spiritual Demands of Artist Groups: Artist groups in China often grapple with spiritual and philosophical inquiries, driven by a desire to address existential questions and societal concerns through their art.

Recommendation

1. General Recommendations

Based on the findings, several key recommendations can be made to further promote the development and preservation of mixed-media painting in China. First, institutions and museums should invest in archiving and documenting the evolution of mixed-media painting from the 85-New Wave to the present. Establishing a comprehensive database of artworks, artist interviews, and exhibition records would provide valuable resources for future researchers and practitioners.

Additionally, art education programs should integrate mixed-media painting more prominently into their curricula. Given its role in shaping contemporary Chinese art, students should be encouraged to explore diverse materials and interdisciplinary approaches. Universities and art academies can facilitate this





by organizing workshops, exhibitions, and academic conferences on mixed-media techniques and historical influences.

Furthermore, public engagement with mixed-media art should be expanded through exhibitions, digital platforms, and cultural initiatives. Art institutions can collaborate with local communities and international organizations to promote awareness of mixed-media art's historical significance and contemporary relevance. Expanding online accessibility through virtual galleries and interactive archives could also make this art form more accessible to a global audience.

2. Further Research Recommendations

While this study provides insights into the development of mixed-media painting after the 85-New Wave, further research is needed to deepen the understanding of its impact and evolution. One potential area of study is a comparative analysis of mixed-media art movements in China and other countries, particularly about how different cultural and political environments shape artistic expression.

Additionally, future research could focus on individual artists and their contributions to mixed-media painting, particularly those whose work has been underrepresented in existing literature. Case studies on lesser-known artists could provide new perspectives on the diversity of mixed-media practices within China.

Another important direction would be to examine the intersection of mixed-media art and digital technology. As contemporary artists increasingly incorporate digital tools into their work, exploring how new media influences mixed-media practices would provide valuable insights into the ongoing evolution of the art form.

Lastly, longitudinal studies tracking the continued institutionalization of mixed-media painting in China would help assess its future trajectory. Analyzing trends in exhibition curation, market reception, and policy changes could provide a clearer picture of how mixed-media art is being shaped by contemporary cultural and economic forces.

By addressing these areas, future research can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of mixed-media painting's role in Chinese contemporary art and its ongoing transformation within a globalized artistic landscape.

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