

# Artist depicts faceless souls of war

In bleak, war-driven paintings and steles of faceless souls, 26-year-old artist Hu Xingyi grapples with identity and the value of human life. Next stop: realistic paintings about a hilarious animal nation, writes Zhou Tao

**H**u Xingyi titles his exhibition "Unidentified" and his unrecognizable, almost abstract faces and figures on canvas and on steles deal with the loss of identity and meaning, especially through the Iraq War.

The exhibit, through March 31 at the Stir gallery, is likely to be a minor milestone in the work of the gifted 26-year-old artist. His works are often mistaken for those of older artists because of their content of pain, suffering and sense of the void.

The show can be considered a milestone because the painter has devoted so much time and energy to it. But it is likely to mark the end of a period of work, and Hu says he will move on to lighter works about an "animal nation."

So this show bids farewell to his current period. It may be of minor importance only because the current period is

only a moment for every young man who is aspiring to be a real artist.

Hu started painting on canvas and stele-like blocks during the Iraq War and its suicide bombings. With subtlety and sometimes the blurring of Chinese ink-like painting, Hu deals with the issues of identity on both the personal and social levels, says Feng Jianwei, the artist's agent.

Though Hu cannot personally experience war, he can deal with its uncertainty and the loss of humanity that it inflicts. Human faces and figures are painted in loose brush strokes and have become almost abstract and unrecognizable.

"Visual effect is more important than anything else," says Hu. This may be the most frequent statement in Hu's debates with his friends — some of them strong "realists" who typically argue that artists'



Hu Xingyi's exhibition "Unidentified" is now under way at the Stir gallery through March 31.

opinions on specific issues are more important than just images.

But his "visual effects" are likely to spoil the expectations of viewers. The unidentifiable faces, as bleak and tortured as the landscapes of Anselm Kiefer, could have been those of the human beings dismembered in war or of the faceless

souls walking down the streets in the fast-moving city where we live.

Hu's works have often been mistaken for those created by a middle-aged artist because they bespeak so much pain and suffering, but Hu is only in his mid-twenties.

After graduation from art academy, Hu was too much

of an idealist to be a nine-to-five person. While working part-time, if he has any spare time, Hu works in his cell-like studio.

"It is in his sensibility that Hu questions people's identity, as well as the value of human lives," says his agent Feng. "Who are we? Where are we and what are we? These are the questions Hu's works present us and himself."

Hu wants us to identify or "unidentify" ourselves and in this flashy and pretentious world, Hu maintains a sense of calmness and a keen self-awareness. Through making his subjects unidentifiable, Hu identifies himself, says Feng.

It seems Hu has dwelt on these works too long and too hard, and he says he feels some dizziness from time to time.

So it's better to put these works aside for the moment and get prepared if these works receive no recognition.

But Hu still has confidence that, more often than not, the value of art will be realized many years after its debut. "George Bernard Shaw has his early novels, written in his twenties, published 50 years after they were written, doesn't he?" says Hu.

Let's think about Hu's next project after this show. He is working on a brand new series with a funny name — "If you can do 10 things that a monkey king can do, you'll be a leader of a nation."

Just as a movie producer will not disclose a movie's plot before it's decided, Hu doesn't talk much about his "animal nation."

"I can only tell you it will be more realistic and much more hilarious," says Hu.

Date: through March 31, 10:30am-9:30pm  
Venue: Stir gallery, 172 Jinxian Rd  
Tel: 5157-5985