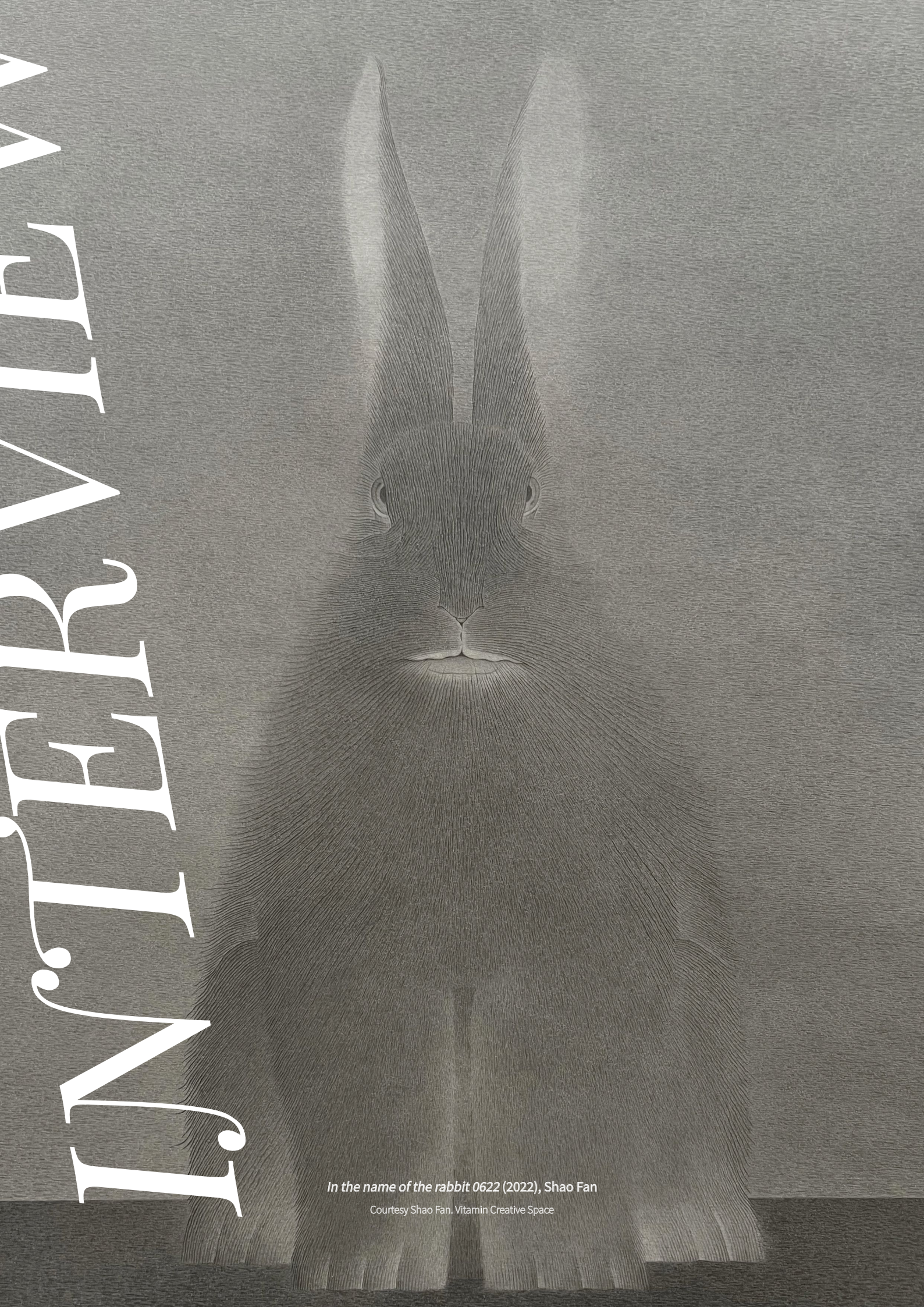
INTERVIEW



In the name of the rabbit 0622 (2022), Shao Fan

Courtesy Shao Fan. Vitamin Creative Space

FACING TIME

Beijing-based artist Shao Fan has built a practice across ink painting, sculpture and garden design, mining the tensions between ancient and modern, fragility and scale. Through his signature rabbits and meticulous technique, he invites us to slow down and encounter the pulse of being.

Shao Fan, also known by his art name Yu Han, is one of China's most compelling contemporary artists. Born in 1964 into a distinguished family of artists in Beijing, he was immersed in painting and traditional aesthetics from earliest childhood. Over more than three decades, his work has spanned ink on rice paper, oil painting, sculpture, garden and architectural design — all united by his sensitivity to material transformation and meditative temporality. Shao Fan has mounted solo exhibitions at major institutions, including "In the name of the rabbit" at Mirrored Gardens, Guangzhou (2023) and "Between the truth and illusion" at Het Noordbrabants Museum, the Netherlands (2020). His work has also featured in international venues such as the M+ Sigg Collection in Hong Kong, "Ink art: Past as present in contemporary China" at The Metropolitan Museum of Art and group exhibitions in Europe, Middle East and Asia.

As a painter whose slow, precise brushwork embodies the rhythm of calligraphic writing and living organisms, Shao Fan's approach is deeply anchored in Chinese tradition, yet charged by the collision with modernity. His recurring motif of the rabbit — elevated to monumental scale — has become emblematic of his quest for equality between all beings, the intersection of fragility and presence and the poetry of time. He speaks of his early years under his grandmother's care, the influence of Western art, the shift from oil to ink, artistic life under lockdown and his aspiration to create distance — not as alienation but as the ground from which depth emerges.

How did your upbringing shape your view of art and the world?

Both my parents are painters, so I began drawing when I was very young — three or four years old. At that time, my parents were both working at the art academy and I grew up mostly with my maternal grandmother in Beijing. My grandmother, who raised me, was born near the end of the Qing dynasty. She told me countless stories about that time — how people dressed, how Manchu women moved their hands, how they maintained grace in daily life. She embodied a world that no longer existed. Those memories marked me deeply. China in the 1970s was a time of scarcity. Life was simple, often harsh, and anything considered "old" was seen as superstitious or backward. But my father loved collecting Ming-style furniture. You could buy it cheaply back then from recycling depots, when people were getting rid of anything from the past. So in our home, these pieces survived: old cabinets, carved tables, wooden screens. They stood

— Rickovia Leung

in sharp contrast to the new things of the time: simple furniture and clothing. As a child, I instinctively felt that old things were better than new ones. Of course, that was *naïve*, but that feeling never left me. It gave me an early sense that time leaves value behind — that age itself contains meaning. When it comes to art, my parents both trained in oil painting. So my first exposure to art was entirely Western. I grew up looking at reproductions of European paintings — Rembrandt, Holbein and others. I was fascinated by those images long before I ever understood them. Chinese painting, on the other hand, seemed distant to me at that age. But the atmosphere of our home, and the presence of my grandmother, quietly shaped my sense of beauty. Those influences stayed dormant until much later, when I began to understand them with age.

How did you first train as an artist?

I started with oil painting, naturally, because of my parents. My earliest lessons came directly from them. They gave me an understanding of form, composition and colour very early on. But my real artistic education happened within the broader context of China's changes after the 1980s.

That was the decade when Western modern and contemporary art entered China. For artists of my generation, it was a shock and an awakening. Suddenly we saw things that were completely new — abstract painting, conceptual work, installation, performance. It opened our eyes and made us realise how narrow our visual world had been.

But this opening also brought confusion. For nearly a century, traditional culture had been continuously suppressed or devalued — from the May Fourth Movement through the Cultural Revolution and even after reform. Western art arrived with such force that it became another form of forgetting. We began to look at ourselves through Western eyes. Only in recent years have we started to return to our roots. Chinese art today still learns from the West, but the need to reconnect with our own traditions has become stronger. For me, that balance — between outward curiosity and inward return — has defined my entire path.

When did you turn to ink painting?

About fifteen years ago. At first, I did not think much of it. I simply treated ink as another medium. I was still painting animals — rabbits, monkeys, aged men — but I tried using brush and ink instead of oil. What surprised me was that everything changed: not only the technique, but also the way I saw and felt the image.

In oil, you construct form through light, volume and colour. Ink, however, grows line by line, stroke by stroke. Every mark carries weight and time. Each hair of the rabbit's fur is drawn individually, like a line of calligraphy. The process is slow and rhythmic, almost like breathing. I realised that the brush and the ink were not just tools — they had their own life. The paper absorbs the ink in unpredictable ways. You cannot control it completely. That is when I began to feel that this medium contains its own philosophy. It reflects both control and surrender, precision and chance. That duality fascinated me.

So ink painting became more than a visual practice; it became a way of thinking, even of living. Through it, I rediscovered something I had felt as a child— the stillness and refinement of Chinese culture, but understood through experience rather than nostalgia.

Why did you choose rabbits as your recurring subject?

It began quite naturally. At one point, I was keeping rabbits at home. I would watch them every day — their quietness, their fragility. They seemed ordinary, yet they had an intensity of presence that drew me in.

The rabbit is soft, fearful and small. But in my paintings, I made them monumental: sometimes as large as humans, sometimes larger. When you stand before a rabbit taller than yourself, it changes the relationship. It is no longer something you look down upon. You meet its gaze.

I think that shift in perspective carries meaning. In Western culture, humans often stand above nature, observing and controlling it. But in Daoist thought, all beings share the same vitality. There is no hierarchy between humans and animals. Painting the rabbit at eye level is a way of returning to that equality — to the idea that everything in the world is alive in the same breath.

Of course, I did not plan these ideas at the beginning. They revealed themselves later. Often, creation begins with intuition, not concept. You do something because it feels necessary and only afterward do you begin to understand why.

How would you describe the process of painting these works?

It is a very slow and physical process. Each line of fur is painted stroke by stroke. Sometimes I will work on a single painting for months. The repetition is demanding but also calming. When you repeat a gesture thousands of times, it becomes a kind of meditation. Unlike oil painting, where you model a form, ink painting is about layering time. Every brushstroke contains a moment of life: your breath, your heartbeat, your focus. When those thousands of small moments accumulate, the image becomes something alive.

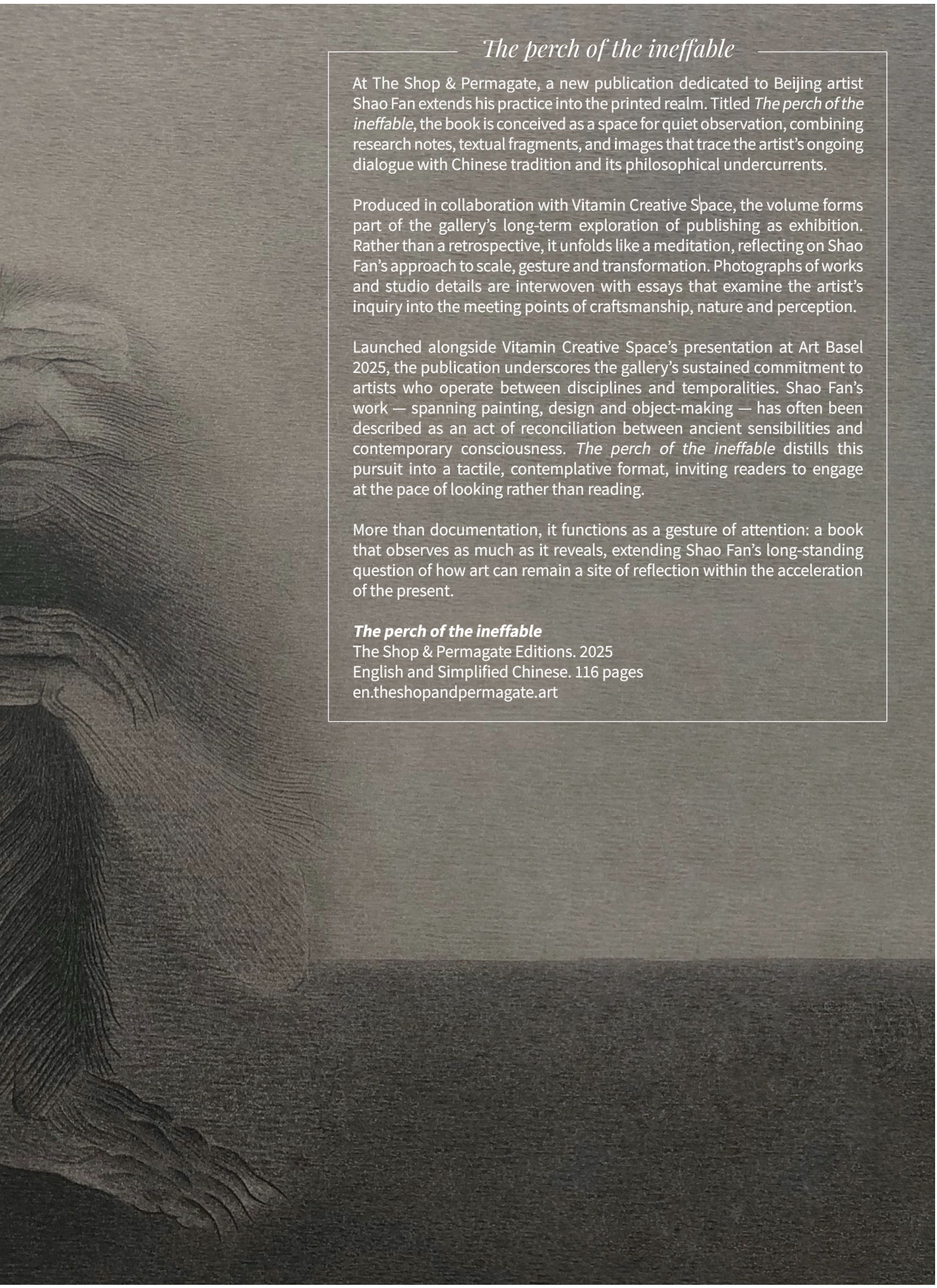
Over the years, I have realised that this act of repetition creates a special mental state. You stop thinking about the outcome; you simply follow the rhythm. It is similar to what artisans experience: craftsmanship at

Shao Fan

Courtesy Shao Fan

The old ape 0921 (2021), Shao Fan

Courtesy Shao Fan. Vitamin Creative Space



The perch of the ineffable

At The Shop & Permagate, a new publication dedicated to Beijing artist Shao Fan extends his practice into the printed realm. Titled *The perch of the ineffable*, the book is conceived as a space for quiet observation, combining research notes, textual fragments, and images that trace the artist's ongoing dialogue with Chinese tradition and its philosophical undercurrents.

Produced in collaboration with Vitamin Creative Space, the volume forms part of the gallery's long-term exploration of publishing as exhibition. Rather than a retrospective, it unfolds like a meditation, reflecting on Shao Fan's approach to scale, gesture and transformation. Photographs of works and studio details are interwoven with essays that examine the artist's inquiry into the meeting points of craftsmanship, nature and perception.

Launched alongside Vitamin Creative Space's presentation at Art Basel 2025, the publication underscores the gallery's sustained commitment to artists who operate between disciplines and temporalities. Shao Fan's work — spanning painting, design and object-making — has often been described as an act of reconciliation between ancient sensibilities and contemporary consciousness. *The perch of the ineffable* distills this pursuit into a tactile, contemplative format, inviting readers to engage at the pace of looking rather than reading.

More than documentation, it functions as a gesture of attention: a book that observes as much as it reveals, extending Shao Fan's long-standing question of how art can remain a site of reflection within the acceleration of the present.

The perch of the ineffable
The Shop & Permagate Editions. 2025
English and Simplified Chinese. 116 pages
en.theshopandpermagate.art

Ming-style eyelash (2007), Shao Fan

Courtesy Shao Fan. Vitamin Creative Space

its most concentrated point. Through that rhythm, you begin to understand tradition not through knowledge but through the body. I think that is what I love most about ink: the way it brings you into contact with time, with patience, with uncertainty. It is not just painting; it is a way of existing.

Did this rhythm evolve during the pandemic?

The pandemic was a very intense and transformative time. In Beijing, we went through long periods of lockdown. For almost three years, life slowed to a near standstill. My world shrank to the size of the studio. Even so, I painted every day, hour after hour. That long repetition, day after day, changed me. The act of painting became inseparable from the experience of time itself. The slow layering of brushstrokes mirrored the suspension of life outside. During that period, I began to realise that the process itself had meaning beyond image-making. It was not about finishing a painting; it was about living within that process. It taught me that the essence of Chinese aesthetics — stillness, endurance, modesty — emerges not from concept but from practice. You do not analyse it; you inhabit it. Those months also deepened my awareness of the connection between body and ink. When you spend so many hours painting, you become aware of every movement, every hesitation. The ink reflects your state of mind instantly — there is no correction, no disguise. It is an honest mirror of your condition.

You have also experimented with sculpture and installation. What draws you to different materials?

For me, art is not primarily about expressing ideas. It is about perceiving and experiencing the world. Different materials give you different ways of feeling. Inspiration happens when something inside you meets something outside. It is like two forces colliding. I might have a certain inner rhythm or sensibility and when it encounters the right object — a piece of wood, a brush, an image — something sparks. That spark is the origin of creation. When I was younger, I loved Ming furniture for its proportions and restraint. In the 1990s, when Western modernist ideas entered China, I discovered installation and design. I began making works from broken furniture, not to convey a message but because the act felt necessary. It was a way of touching history through material. Later, when I returned to ink, I carried that same attitude with me: the desire to connect tradition and the present through direct experience. Recently, as artificial intelligence became a common topic, I found myself thinking: why not paint it? So last year, I made three portraits of AI, using brush and ink. AI has no face, but I imagined what it might look like. That project was not about the use of IA; it was about response. To use the oldest medium to depict the newest subject felt right. It is a conversation between the self and the self.

How do you see the relationship between past and future in your work?

Time is always the central subject. When I think about the future, I often find myself turning toward the past. The future is uncertain and invisible, but the past is tangible: it carries memory, emotion, lessons. I often say that the future is a reflection of the past. When you look backward deeply enough, you begin to glimpse forward. That is why art must not be consumed entirely by the present. Its meaning lies in creating distance. That distance allows reflection. It is what gives art its depth. In my own practice, I like to "walk backward", to approach the future through the past. By revisiting forgotten things, we rediscover what it means to be human. Ancient civilisations — Chinese, Egyptian, Greek — still hold immense creative power. They remind us of where perception begins. Western modern art helped me realise this. Without that encounter, we might not have understood how much we had lost. In China, the link to tradition was broken during the twentieth century, but traces remain: small gestures, fragments of language, ways of moving or seeing. I find those remnants very moving. They are fragile but alive. They are where my art begins.

> "Future is a reflection of the past. When you look backward deeply enough, you begin to glimpse forward. That is why art must not be consumed entirely by the present. Its meaning lies in creating distance. — Shao Fan

You have worked with galleries and collectors in China and abroad. What have these relationships taught you?

I do not interact much with collectors directly. I mostly work

The portrait for AI no.1 (2024), Shao Fan

Courtesy Shao Fan. Vitamin Creative Space

with galleries and curators. Everyone in the art world has their own rhythm. Mine is slow; I like to take time. I was fortunate to find a gallery that works at the same pace. That shared rhythm makes collaboration natural.
Over the years, I have noticed that foreign collectors who began buying Chinese art in the 1990s have changed a lot. Back then, they were mostly interested in works dealing with ideology or social commentary. Today, their interest has become more nuanced. Many now appreciate the depth of Chinese culture itself: the language of ink, the philosophy behind form. That evolution shows maturity. Understanding takes time.

After all these years, how has your view of art evolved?

I have realised that what I seek most is distance; even from life itself. Art comes from life, but only by stepping back can you see it clearly.
In my paintings, that sense of distance manifests through time and labour. Each work holds the trace of thousands of movements, each one pulling slightly away from the last. It is like drawing a bow — the string and the wood are one, yet only through tension do they gain power. That separation, that stretch, is where vitality appears.
When I was younger, I could not articulate this. Now I see it clearly. Painting never felt like a profession; it was part of life, as natural as breathing.
Over time, I moved between materials — sculpture, oil, ink — and through that journey, my reflections on art and life deepened.
Art is not theory or philosophy. It does not explain; it perceives. Its purpose is to make us feel, to awaken our senses. Through art, we can reach dimensions of emotion and spirit that language and reason cannot describe. That, to me, is its most human power.

Vitamin Creative Space's booth on Art Basel Paris 2024

Courtesy Vitamin Creative Space