



## The Self in 'Silhouette'

After a health scare, exiled Chinese artist Gao Xingjian returns to the public eye with new works.

By ALEXANDRA A. SENO

**G**AO XINGJIAN COMES FROM A centuries-old tradition of multitasking. The author of the novel "Soul Mountain" may be best known as the controversial winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2000—the first time the prize was ever awarded to a Chinese writer. But he is also a successful painter, poet and playwright. His works have often been about the dignity of the individual, a motif that has earned him international respect as an artist and much personal suffering in a land that has long glorified the collective.

Gao channels all his various skills and favorite themes into "Silhouette Sinon l'Ombre" ("Silhouette/Shadow"), a film finished last year but unlikely ever to be widely screened. "Silhouette/Shadow" has no conventional plot but traces Gao's personal journey toward the metaphysical. It

shows him, in almost a Taoist trance, working with brush and ink wash on large pieces of paper. The artist walks in and out of the camera's viewfinder but barely speaks throughout the 90-minute movie. It's a study of visual textures, weaving dreamlike sequences with documentary footage, going back and forth between color and the black-and-white his paintings are known for. Last month he released a book of the same title to make his masterwork a little more accessible, expounding on the film with essays, still photographs and poems. "He always felt this might be one of his last projects," says Fiona Sze Lorrain, Gao's friend and the book's editor.

Indeed, a narrow brush with mortality prompted the new work. Since 2003—declared "The Year of Gao Xingjian" by the French city of Marseille, where he has been a citizen since 1998—Gao, 67, has undergone two heart surgeries. His illness sharply curtailed his writing but inspired

**CRITICAL VOICE:** *Gao now lives in Marseille*

this small, self-funded work. Now, with the verve of one given another chance at life, a healthier Gao has been engaging the public once again. Earlier this year, he appeared in Germany for an exhibit of his paintings. In September he traveled to the United States for an academic convention on his work. Last month he made his first trip to Singapore in almost two decades to donate a painting to a museum. Next year Hong Kong will host a major festival in his honor; Gao will preside over a forum at a public library, at least one gallery is preparing a show, his plays will be performed and his film will be screened for art-house crowds.

Early on, Gao's uncompromising devotion to his craft turned him into one of China's most provocative artists. As an intellectual, he was sent to the countryside for "re-education" during the Cultural Revolution. When he returned, he made a name for himself with modern, experimental dramas inspired by Brecht and Beckett. He was banned after authorities deemed his 1983 play "Bus Stop" critical of the government. Misdiagnosed with lung cancer and hearing rumors that he was going to be sent to a labor camp, he began a walk along the Yangtze River that lasted almost a year; the journey became "Soul Mountain," the novel that led to the Nobel. In 1989, as an asylum seeker in France, Gao angered Beijing by writing a play condemning the brutal handling of the Tiananmen Square student protests. In his early years as an exile in Paris, he made ends meet by selling his paintings.

Despite his claims to be apolitical, Gao's relationship with China remains fragile. "Intellectuals know him quite well," says Chinese University of Hong Kong's Gilbert Fong Chee-fun, an organizer of the Gao festival and an expert on his work. "[But] the common people in China have never heard of his name. His books and plays are still banned, and his name is not allowed to be mentioned in the media."

Other artists who left China in the 1980s have returned. They hold American or European passports but spend months each year in China, where the "cultural industries," as the government calls the arts, are flourishing. But it's not an option for Gao. "He does not have any desire to go back," says Lorrain. "There is too much baggage." Still, Fong insists that Gao's "Silhouette" makes a statement the government can't ignore. "He did the film because if you say something, you exist," he says. Even if you say it primarily through cryptic images. ■