

How Material Surfaces Communicate Meaning in Contemporary Chinese Mixed-Media Art

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Abstract

This paper examines how material surfaces communicate meaning in contemporary Chinese mixed-media art. Rather than treating surfaces as secondary or decorative elements, the study approaches them as active sites of expression shaped by material choice, process, and sensory engagement. Through a conceptual analysis of recurring surface conditions, including roughness, layering, and wear, the paper demonstrates that meaning is produced through physical traces, perceptual resistance, and embodied experience rather than through explicit imagery or symbolic representation. The discussion further considers how everyday and discarded materials, as well as process-based surface formation, embed time, use, and material history directly into surface structures. By focusing on surface as a non-linguistic mode of communication, the paper offers an alternative framework for understanding how contemporary Chinese mixed-media art conveys experience, memory, and tension through material presence and sensory perception.

Keywords: material surface, mixed-media art, contemporary Chinese art, sensory engagement, material process, non-linguistic communication

1. Introduction

In recent years, mixed-media practices in contemporary Chinese art have shown a growing emphasis on material surfaces. Instead of placing visual imagery or narrative themes at the center of artistic expression, many works draw attention to the physical state of materials themselves. Surfaces shaped by layering, abrasion, accumulation, or visible intervention often become the most immediate element encountered by viewers. These material conditions influence how a work is perceived before any symbolic or thematic interpretation takes place.

Within existing discussions of contemporary Chinese art, analysis has frequently focused on subject matter, symbolism, or broader social references. Material surfaces are often mentioned only briefly, usually as technical features or stylistic choices that support an underlying concept. Such approaches tend to separate meaning from material presence, treating surfaces as secondary rather than integral to artistic communication. This separation becomes particularly limiting in mixed-media art, where the interaction between different materials and processes plays a central role in shaping visual and sensory experience.

This study approaches material surfaces as an

active component of meaning rather than a neutral background for representation. The physical qualities of a surface—such as roughness, thickness, or signs of wear—affect how viewers engage with a work. These qualities can slow down visual perception, encourage tactile imagination, and draw attention to processes of making and transformation. Meaning, in this sense, does not rely on clear images or explicit messages but develops through the viewer's encounter with material conditions that resist smoothness and immediate comprehension.

The discussion that follows examines how material surfaces function within contemporary Chinese mixed-media art by identifying several recurring modes of surface formation. Instead of concentrating on individual artists or specific works, the paper focuses on shared surface characteristics and considers how they contribute to meaning-making across different practices. By doing so, it aims to show that material surfaces are not merely formal elements but play a significant role in how contemporary mixed-media artworks communicate experience and significance.

2. Material Surface and Meaning

This section clarifies how the term *material surface* is understood in this study. Rather than using the concept in a purely descriptive or technical sense, the discussion treats material surface as an analytical category that links material properties, processes of making, and the production of meaning. By establishing this framework, the paper moves beyond everyday usage and situates material surface within a broader interpretive context relevant to contemporary mixed-media art.

2.1 Material Surface as More Than Appearance

In common usage, surface is often understood as the outer layer of an object, associated primarily with visual appearance. Within the context of contemporary mixed-media art, however, material surface cannot be reduced to what is immediately seen. Surfaces are shaped through specific choices of materials, methods of manipulation, and sequences of production. As a result, they carry traces of process and duration rather than functioning as neutral visual finishes.

Material surfaces frequently reveal signs of intervention such as layering, abrasion, accumulation, or partial destruction. These

visible traces point to actions that have taken place over time, drawing attention to how a work has been made rather than presenting a polished or resolved image. In this sense, surface operates as a record of material interaction, where making, altering, and reworking become perceptible to the viewer.

Understanding surface in this way shifts the focus from appearance to formation. Instead of asking what a surface represents, attention is directed toward how it has come into being and what kinds of experiences it evokes. Layered or worn surfaces, for example, may suggest repetition, duration, or use without relying on explicit narrative or symbolic references. Meaning emerges through the viewer's awareness of material transformation, rather than through recognizable imagery or iconography.

By treating material surface as the outcome of material choice, process, and time, this study frames surface as an active component of artistic communication. It is not simply a visual attribute added at the final stage of production, but a site where physical action, temporal accumulation, and perceptual engagement intersect. This understanding provides a conceptual basis for analyzing how material surfaces contribute to meaning-making in contemporary Chinese mixed-media art.

2.2 Surface as a Site of Meaning

Meaning in contemporary art is often discussed in relation to images, symbols, or representational content. Such approaches assume that interpretation primarily depends on what is depicted or referenced. In mixed-media practices, however, meaning is not always generated through recognizable imagery or symbolic forms. Instead, it frequently emerges through the viewer's encounter with material surfaces that shape perception in less direct ways.

Material surfaces contribute to meaning by altering how a work is visually and sensorially accessed. Rough, layered, or uneven surfaces can interrupt smooth visual scanning, slowing down perception and preventing immediate comprehension. This visual resistance shifts attention away from image recognition and toward the physical presence of the work. As a result, meaning develops through engagement with material conditions rather than through decoding visual signs.

In addition to visual effects, material surfaces also activate tactile imagination. Even when physical touch is not possible, surfaces marked by thickness, abrasion, or irregularity invite viewers to imagine how they might feel if touched. This imagined tactility introduces the body into the act of interpretation, extending meaning-making beyond purely optical experience. The surface thus becomes a point where sensory perception and cognitive interpretation intersect.

Through these sensory responses, material surfaces communicate experience rather than explicit messages. They evoke duration, effort, resistance, or transformation without relying on narrative explanation. Meaning is produced through the way surfaces condition perception and bodily awareness, rather than through clearly articulated themes or symbols. In this sense, the surface functions as a site where meaning is formed through sensory engagement and material presence, offering an alternative mode of communication within contemporary mixed-media art.

3. Modes of Surface Communication in Mixed-Media Art

3.1 Rough and Irregular Surfaces: Expressing Instability and Tension

Rough and irregular surfaces appear frequently in contemporary Chinese mixed-media art and often function as an immediate point of engagement. In contrast to smooth or carefully polished finishes, these surfaces emphasize unevenness, friction, and resistance at the level of material itself. They tend to look unfinished, unsettled, or deliberately unresolved, disrupting conventional expectations of refinement, balance, and visual harmony. Rather than offering a surface that invites effortless consumption, roughness introduces a sense of interruption, positioning tension as a central feature of the viewing experience.

One important effect of rough and irregular surfaces is their capacity to undermine the impression of completion. Polished surfaces often signal resolution and control, suggesting that a work has reached a final and stable state. Rough textures, by contrast, interrupt this visual logic. Scratches, cracks, exposed layers, and uneven accumulations draw attention to processes of making that would otherwise remain hidden. The surface no longer conceals labor and intervention but makes them visible,

allowing traces of action to remain present. In doing so, roughness challenges ideals of perfection and mastery by presenting the artwork as provisional and open-ended rather than finished and contained.

The visibility of these processes also affects how time is perceived within the work. Rough surfaces often suggest repetition, revision, or sustained engagement with materials, even when no specific sequence is shown. Marks appear accumulated rather than singular, implying that the surface has been shaped through ongoing interaction rather than a single decisive gesture. This sense of temporal extension contributes to the instability of the surface, as it resists being read as a fixed outcome. Instead, the surface appears as a moment within a longer process, reinforcing a sense of incompleteness and tension.

Rough and irregular surfaces further shape meaning by producing visual discomfort. Their uneven structure slows down perception and prevents smooth visual scanning, making it difficult for the viewer to take in the work at a glance. This resistance creates a form of friction between the viewer and the artwork, in which looking becomes a negotiated activity rather than a passive act. Importantly, this discomfort does not depend on recognizable imagery or explicit narrative content. It emerges directly from the material condition of the surface, allowing tension to be experienced rather than interpreted.

Through this material resistance, the surface generates an awareness of instability that extends beyond formal concerns. The viewer's inability to fully settle into the image mirrors broader experiences of uncertainty and strain. However, these associations are not conveyed through representation or symbolism. Instead, they arise through embodied perception, where tension is sensed through disrupted visual flow and material roughness. The surface thus communicates affective conditions without translating them into explicit visual signs.

Rough and irregular textures can also be understood in relation to the broader dominance of smoothness in contemporary visual culture. Polished surfaces are commonly associated with efficiency, mass production, and standardized aesthetic norms, particularly within commercial and digital environments. Against this backdrop, rough surfaces interrupt expectations

of visual ease and consumption. By foregrounding imperfection, resistance, and material irregularity, they challenge the logic of smooth visual pleasure.

Within contemporary Chinese mixed-media art, rough surfaces offer an alternative visual language that prioritizes friction, material presence, and experiential realism over refinement and coherence. Their refusal of smoothness is not simply an aesthetic preference but a communicative strategy. Through uneven and resistant surfaces, artists articulate a sense of reality marked by instability, strain, and unresolved tension. In this way, roughness functions as a material mode of expression, allowing tension to be conveyed through surface conditions rather than through explicit narrative or symbolic means.

3.2 Layered and Accumulated Surfaces: Visualizing Concealment and Memory

Layered and accumulated surfaces constitute another important mode through which material surfaces communicate meaning in contemporary Chinese mixed-media art. Unlike single-layer surfaces that present a unified and immediately legible visual field, layered surfaces are produced through repeated acts of addition, covering, and overlap. As materials accumulate, earlier layers become partially or fully obscured, resulting in surfaces that appear dense, uneven, and visually complex. This structural complexity shifts attention away from surface appearance alone and toward the conditions of concealment and depth that shape perception.

The act of concealment plays a central role in the communicative function of layered surfaces. By covering underlying materials, these surfaces resist transparency and deny full visual access. Viewers encounter a surface that implies depth without permitting complete visual penetration, prompting speculation about what lies beneath. Meaning does not emerge from clear representation or identifiable imagery, but from an awareness of obstruction and absence. What is hidden or only partially revealed becomes an active component of interpretation rather than a lack to be resolved.

This tension between visibility and invisibility fundamentally alters the viewing process. Instead of offering a surface that can be fully grasped at once, layered structures require viewers to negotiate uncertainty. The surface appears to withhold information, slowing

perception and preventing immediate comprehension. In this way, layered surfaces generate meaning not through direct communication, but through delayed access and incomplete disclosure. Interpretation becomes a process shaped by speculation and inference rather than recognition.

Layered accumulation also introduces a strong temporal dimension that closely parallels the workings of memory. Each added layer implies a prior moment of action, while the final surface records the result of multiple interventions over time. Rather than presenting time as a linear progression, the surface suggests temporal sedimentation, where earlier moments are preserved but obscured by subsequent layers. This structure mirrors the way memory often operates through accumulation, interruption, and partial erasure.

Instead of functioning as a coherent narrative, layered surfaces evoke fragmented recollection. Traces of earlier layers remain embedded within the surface, yet they are no longer fully accessible. Memory, in this sense, is not presented as a stable archive but as a shifting field shaped by repetition, covering, and loss. The surface becomes a material analogue for memory that is constantly rewritten, where the past persists as residue rather than as a complete or transparent record.

Through these characteristics, layered and accumulated surfaces communicate meaning by staging a persistent tension between presence and invisibility. The surface does not deliver a fixed or unified message; instead, it demands that viewers engage with what is only partially available. Meaning emerges through this process of negotiation, where concealment itself becomes expressive. In contemporary Chinese mixed-media art, layered surfaces thus function as material structures that visualize memory not as clarity or continuity, but as an accumulation of traces shaped by coverage, interruption, and the limits of visibility.

3.3 Worn and Aged Surfaces: Communicating Time and Use

Worn and aged surfaces constitute a distinct mode of surface communication in contemporary Chinese mixed-media art. Unlike rough or layered surfaces, which emphasize tension or concealment, worn surfaces foreground the effects of use, exposure, and gradual transformation. Visual marks such as

fading, erosion, cracking, thinning, or discoloration suggest that the surface has undergone prolonged contact with time and repeated action. These traces immediately signal duration, allowing time to be perceived through material condition rather than through narrative reference.

The communicative force of worn surfaces lies in their capacity to register time as physical change. Instead of depicting historical events or representing specific temporal moments, these surfaces make time visible through deterioration and loss. Wear functions as evidence of repetition, endurance, and sustained interaction, indicating that the surface has been acted upon continuously rather than produced in a single, decisive moment. In this sense, time is not symbolized or narrated but embedded directly within the material itself.

Through wear, surfaces also shift attention away from intention and toward experience. Aged surfaces often appear altered beyond the artist's immediate control, shaped by processes that extend beyond initial design. Signs of use imply handling, exposure, or environmental contact, suggesting participation in conditions larger than the moment of creation. This implication weakens the emphasis on authorship and mastery, directing interpretation toward accumulated experience and material vulnerability. Meaning emerges not from deliberate form-making alone, but from the recognition of gradual consumption and transformation.

Worn surfaces further complicate the relationship between presence and absence. As materials thin, erode, or fade, loss becomes visible. However, this loss does not signal failure or deficiency. Instead, absence functions as an expressive element, indicating what has been worn away through time and use. The surface thus communicates through what remains and what has disappeared, allowing thinning and erosion to carry meaning rather than detract from it.

By foregrounding wear and aging, these surfaces transform time into a perceptible dimension of the artwork. The surface operates as a material record of endurance, enabling viewers to sense duration through physical traces rather than through storytelling or imagery. Time is experienced as residue and alteration rather than as a coherent sequence. In

this way, worn and aged surfaces function as a visual form of temporal experience, communicating history not as a complete or stable narrative, but as an accumulation of material changes shaped by use, exposure, and gradual loss.

4. The Role of Material Choice and Process

4.1 *Everyday and Discarded Materials*

Everyday and discarded materials play a significant role in shaping meaning within contemporary Chinese mixed-media art. Materials drawn from daily life, such as packaging, fabric, paper, or industrial remnants, carry associations that precede their incorporation into an artwork. Their familiarity situates the work within an ordinary material world, creating an immediate connection to lived experience rather than to specialized artistic media.

The use of such materials introduces a sense of reality that differs from traditional art materials. Because everyday and discarded objects are often marked by prior use or circulation, they retain traces of handling, wear, or exposure. These traces are not neutral; they signal social contexts of production, consumption, and disposal. As a result, the material itself contributes to meaning before any formal arrangement or surface treatment takes place.

Material origin functions as an implicit layer of communication. Discarded materials, in particular, carry connotations of obsolescence, excess, or abandonment. When integrated into mixed-media surfaces, these materials do not simply serve as raw components but bring with them a history of use and displacement. This history remains embedded in the surface, shaping how the work is perceived and interpreted.

By incorporating everyday and discarded materials, artists foreground material reality as a source of meaning. The surface becomes a site where prior functions and contexts are neither fully erased nor directly narrated. Instead, meaning develops through the recognition of familiar materials recontextualized within an artistic framework. In this way, material choice itself becomes a formative element in the communication of experience, grounding abstract expression in tangible, everyday conditions.

4.2 *Process-Based Surface Formation*

In contemporary Chinese mixed-media art, surface formation is often closely tied to process rather than predetermined design. Handmade marks, repeated actions, and partially uncontrollable procedures contribute directly to how surfaces take shape. Instead of aiming for precise replication or uniform outcomes, these processes allow variation, irregularity, and material response to emerge over time. As a result, the final surface reflects not only material choice but also the conditions under which it was produced.

Process-based surface formation makes the act of making visible. Repetition leaves accumulative traces, while manual intervention introduces inconsistency and deviation. Unpredictable factors—such as drying, erosion, pressure, or material interaction—further shape the surface in ways that cannot be fully anticipated. These elements inscribe the process itself into the surface structure, transforming it into a record of action rather than a neutral support for imagery.

Through this emphasis on process, meaning develops alongside material transformation. The surface does not function as a finished stage onto which significance is later projected. Instead, significance emerges from the gradual interaction between intention, material resistance, and repeated intervention. The visible marks of labor and contingency direct attention to how the work has come into being, inviting viewers to consider duration, effort, and uncertainty as integral components of interpretation.

By foregrounding process-based surface formation, contemporary mixed-media practices challenge the separation between making and meaning. The surface communicates experience precisely because it bears the marks of its own formation. Meaning is thus embedded in material action and temporal development, rather than constructed solely through conceptual explanation or symbolic reference. In this sense, the surface operates as both the outcome of process and the medium through which that process continues to be communicated.

5. Surface, Viewer, and Sensory Engagement

Material surfaces play a decisive role in shaping how viewers engage with contemporary Chinese mixed-media art. Rather than guiding interpretation through recognizable symbols or

narrative cues, surfaces influence understanding by conditioning sensory experience. The viewer's response begins not with decoding meaning, but with perceptual and bodily reactions to material presence.

In many mixed-media works, surface irregularity disrupts smooth visual scanning. Roughness, layering, and wear introduce visual resistance that slows perception and interrupts habitual modes of looking. This obstruction prevents immediate comprehension and encourages prolonged attention. As vision is delayed or unsettled, the viewer becomes more aware of the surface itself as an active component of the artwork, rather than as a transparent carrier of content.

Such visual resistance often activates tactile imagination. Even in the absence of physical contact, textured surfaces suggest weight, pressure, or friction, prompting viewers to imagine how the material might feel. This imagined tactility brings the body into the interpretive process, shifting understanding away from purely optical interpretation toward embodied experience. Meaning develops through sensory engagement, where perception is shaped by the interaction between sight, imagined touch, and awareness of material process.

Through this shift, material surfaces alter the conventional relationship between artwork and viewer. Interpretation is no longer based primarily on linguistic explanation or symbolic reference, but on experiential encounter. The surface becomes a mediating interface that guides how the work is approached, sensed, and understood. By redirecting attention from representation to sensation, material surfaces establish an alternative pathway of meaning-making, one grounded in bodily perception and sensory response rather than in language alone.

6. Discussion

The preceding analysis demonstrates that material surfaces in contemporary Chinese mixed-media art function as more than visual finishes or technical effects. Across different modes—roughness, layering, wear, material choice, and process-based formation—surfaces consistently operate as mechanisms through which meaning is produced and communicated. Rather than serving a decorative role, surface becomes an active site where artistic expression

takes place.

One key implication of this discussion is that surfaces assume communicative responsibilities traditionally associated with narrative or representation. In many mixed-media practices, surfaces convey experiences of instability, concealment, duration, or use without relying on figurative imagery or explicit storytelling. Meaning is articulated through material conditions that guide perception and sensation, allowing surfaces to perform narrative and emotional functions in indirect but effective ways. This mode of communication does not replace narrative entirely, but it shifts emphasis toward experiential and material registers.

The analysis also highlights how surface-based communication operates through non-linguistic means. Instead of addressing the viewer through symbols or textual references, material surfaces engage the senses by shaping how a work is encountered. Visual resistance, tactile imagination, and awareness of material process contribute to understanding in ways that cannot be easily translated into language. Meaning emerges through bodily engagement and perceptual negotiation, positioning the surface as a mediator between material action and viewer experience.

Within the context of contemporary Chinese mixed-media art, this non-linguistic mode of communication holds particular significance. It provides a means of expression that does not depend on direct representation or discursive clarity, allowing artists to address experience, memory, and tension through material presence. By operating at the level of surface, mixed-media works establish a form of communication that is grounded in sensation and process rather than in explicit explanation. This understanding reframes material surfaces as central components of artistic meaning, rather than as secondary or purely formal elements.

7. Conclusion

This paper has examined how material surfaces communicate meaning in contemporary Chinese mixed-media art by focusing on surface conditions, material choice, and sensory engagement. Rather than treating surfaces as secondary or decorative elements, the analysis has shown that material surfaces possess an independent expressive capacity. Through their physical structure and visible traces of formation, surfaces participate directly in the

production of meaning.

The discussion has demonstrated that meaning in mixed-media art emerges through the interaction of surface structure, material origin, and perceptual experience. Roughness, layering, and wear shape how works are encountered, while everyday materials and process-based formation embed prior use and action into the surface itself. These elements guide interpretation by conditioning sensory response rather than by transmitting explicit messages or symbolic content.

Approaching contemporary Chinese mixed-media art from the perspective of material surfaces offers a way to address forms of expression that resist clear articulation. Surface-based communication allows experience, tension, and memory to be conveyed through material presence and bodily engagement, providing insight into artistic practices that operate beyond linguistic explanation. By foregrounding surface as a site of meaning, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how contemporary art communicates through material and sensory means, and it suggests the potential for further research that explores artistic meaning through material processes and perceptual experience.

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