



'Stop' from the series 'Sense of security', 1985  
oil on canvas

La Trobe University, Geoff Raby Collection of Chinese Art.  
Donated by Dr Geoff Raby AO through the Australian  
Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2019. © Ah Xian.  
Photo: Jia De

Although Ah Xian is best known for his work in sculpture, particularly with porcelain, he is also a self-taught painter. *Stop* is one of his early oil paintings, belonging to a series of eight works titled *Sense of security* that he produced in the mid-1980s. While the title of the series is drawn from a phrase used in Beijing's public transportation network ('Pay attention to security'), it speaks more broadly to a sense of anxiety around surveillance and privacy.

In this oil on canvas work, elements from the outside world are placed within a domestic interior space. Although stop signs and road markings ordinarily guide us safely through the world, here they become disorienting, obscuring the demarcation between interior and exterior. The light entering the space is artificial, casting harsh shadows onto the floor. Even the presence of the furniture is slightly unsettling, in that it appears almost anthropomorphic; we might imagine that the chair in the foreground is obeying the stop sign and waiting patiently to cross the road.

In 1978, Deng Xiaoping introduced his 'Open Door' policy, which resulted in what has been referred to as 'the collision with Western culture' (Van Dijk 1991–92, p. 33). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, exhibitions of Western art were brought to China and these proved highly influential for many contemporary artists. This early painting by Ah Xian draws on these influences, particularly aspects of Surrealism, hard-edge abstraction and perhaps even the work of the American painter Edward Hopper, whose iconic representations of urban isolation are also marked by disquiet.

Shanti Shea-An, 2022

Reference:

Van Dijk, H 1991–92, 'Painting in China after the Cultural Revolution: style developments and theoretical debates, part 1: 1979–1985', *China Information*, vol. 6, no. 3, pp. 25–43.