

燃点 Ran Dian

“Zheng Chongbin—Myth, Matter, Medium,” *Ran Dian*, December 18, 2015

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Note: Introduction updated

Art in China is driven by conflict but not as frequently assumed by Western commentators. There is no simple “degenerate art” opposition to power—assuming there ever was, even in the West. And anyway, power is both slippery and mutable. Like any society in great transition, there are numerous fractures and tensions and in art, as in society, these occur between regions, between the rural and the metropolis, between tradition and modernity, Communism and Confucianism, and most interestingly between ink and contemporary. The Shan Sui traditions, seemingly familiar to everyone everywhere, reflect a halcyon and mythologized return to nature. Indeed, one might say that the almost relentless taste for landscapes formed during the Northern Song and Yuan dynasties crystallized as the “true” representation of culture in China. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, within the academy system and politically, its masters sit close to power. Meanwhile, what is termed “contemporary”, for want of something better, is critical but in all directions, including Westward; and as compromised and reliant upon the very New York gallery system that gave these artists their freedom to make art in the first place: the opportunity to be seen and be successful. Little wonder then that the ink and contemporary camps don’t really get along.

Yet there are exceptions, artists who refuse either to conform to or renounce tradition: and also to act in a new context with regard to how the Chinese tradition encounters the West. They are a surprisingly disparate bunch. Ink has been associated with deconstruction (such as the 1970s “anti black painting movement”), construction in the 1990s (e.g. “New Elite painting”) and more recently reconstruction. Notable among this new generation are artists such as Yang Jiechang 杨诒苍 (b.1956) from Guangzhou and Qiu Zhijie 邱志杰 (b.1969) and Zheng Chongbin (b. 1961), both of whom studied at Hangzhou’s famed Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now the China Academy of Fine Arts).

After graduating and becoming a member of the Academy, in 1989 Zheng Chongbin moved to San Francisco to undertake a Masters of Fine Art. In essence he has fought an unwinnable but fertile battle to deconstruct and meld traditions. The following conversation with Zheng centered on how he defines his gambit with ink and art history. Finally, it must be never be forgotten that ink, in a way, is the most ideological art language in China. Inevitably this affects

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every aspect of its conception and understanding. This has the strange effect that all discussion of form is also a (politically) critical discussion. (Chris Moore with Liang Shuhan).

Ink and media

Zheng Chongbin: Recently I gave a talk at Asian Contemporary Week in New York people view me as an ink artist, but I wanted to talk about how artists deal with media and see things broadly from the perspectives of the past, and now relative to ink art. I try to blur that boundary in my art as well—it's important not to enter more pigeonholes.



Zheng Chongbin. (Image courtesy Ink Studio).

The problem of definition

Chris Moore: I think there is an inherent problem concerning definition. Art is not about words; any definition we attempt is arbitrary. One of the biggest ones, certainly in modernism, is “abstract art”—it doesn’t mean anything. I like the way Britta [Erickson] refers to it as “non-mimetic art” and discusses the move away from that as opposed to realistic art. Abstract art, if it’s any good, is not mere pretty swishes, it’s extremely real. (1)

ZC: She mentioned artists living today, of whom many are in a sense trans-continental. I think it’s that art historians tried to differentiate abstraction [from previous movements]. But to me, really, it’s just language. Every period of history refers to the previous one or to its present surroundings. I also believe artists sense the future, how art has to evolve. I think that attitude you mention is more in art criticism.



Zheng Chongbin, “Overlapped shape”, ink and acrylic on xuan paper, 199 x 230 cm, 2015. (Image courtesy the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing).

CM: Art criticism and art theory become a type of translation; as with all translations, something is always lost.

Pushing the limits of the ink medium

CM: The paintings you produce happen to be constructions, maps and explorations of paper, ink, matte, gloss, the interaction of white and black, space and the controlling of space... Do we talk about them specifically, from the inside— or, do we go in the other direction and talk about how we encounter the paintings as a viewer?—which is the business of standing in front of a work of a certain size and interpreting, not necessarily with words but in terms of images. I like the point Britta made about how the uncertainties and the numerousness of Western philosophy appeals to a generation of thinkers, writers, artists, philosophers who are coming out of the Cultural Revolution precisely because it is uncertain, partly hidden, and not completely explained. These are the two sides I would like you to discuss.

ZC: If I'm talking about today, it's about all the physicality of the media. It's the light and space and the objecthood or tangibility. I think it really comes down to questions about how you use the perceptual engagement, To me, the viewer's experience is essential.

You mention the intellectualism coming to China in the '80s. I think it came in with a social dynamic, and artists across the board were inspired and felt something new was about to happen, and that there was a need to understand these thoughts coming from a totally different place, rather than would have been known from school; of course, I take a shortcut in terms of looking and being inspired. The essential thing is that I wanted to break it and I need to find the right key. What I was looking for is the formulation—the way I understand being educated, how being taught affects how you look at things and how you conduct your operations in very direct ways. To break out and to expand that—naturally I am looking at the concept of non-descriptive art—this means a break in formalism, breaking narratives, which exactly fits what I was looking at at that time.

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Zheng Chongbin, "5 definitions", ink and acrylic on xuan paper, 287 x 292 cm, 2012. (Image courtesy the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing).

When the show of Russian work opened, people were stunned, like the French were by Impressionism. It's really about art and media, how you can execute it in an exceptional way and much freely. But in looking at that Russian work, everybody thought art doesn't have to be that way and can be completely different. All these are the pivotal points for our entry into unknown territory. I'm exploring the possibility of how to push media further and back in terms of what that means to me and what I can extract from myself.

I'm talking working with ink; there's a lot of resonance in it. I'm always looking versus the Western artists that have influenced me. They are looking the other way around, thinking about how to consider "fullness" in the void, how to formalize it and grasp things that cannot

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be seen. So it's not what you see, it's what you want to see. I think it perfectly fits that ink has that kind of philosophical nuance in itself.



Zheng Chongbin, "Chimeric Landscape", video, 2015. (Image courtesy the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing).

CM: It's partly too that it relies on description. When you encounter an artwork, it is very much an existential moment. It's also a journalistic thing—you have to describe what is in front of you and record it, whereas most of the time we are going through life and only seeing the clichés, rather than actually looking.

ZC: I am looking at Chinese paintings in terms of how they are perceiving the world, and in order to understand themselves—not particularly the work itself. Technically it's masterful, but in another way you feel there is so much that has been defined and that is gestural and very formal.



Zheng Chongbin, “Wall of Skies”, installation view at Ink Studio, 2015. (Image courtesy the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing).

Breaking the rules

CM: But you hit the point there, because in the Chinese classical tradition, gesture is something that is highly regulated. It’s very precise, whereas in the much more recent Western modernist painting tradition, gesture can mean something quite flippant.

ZC: Yes, in Chinese painting there are almost rules you have to follow for how to paint. But even though artists try to break away from these formulas, they are still very much buried in their vocabulary, which to me is limited. But also I see Western abstract paintings as reaching a limit; you can actually see there is a peak it reaches before really losing its intensity. I don’t think the Western younger generation talk about their work—by the ’80s and ’90s abstract painting had already been exhausted, and then there was not much reference [to tradition and history] other than continuing to push [insular abstract] genre...And so this whole notion about painting totally changed, versus the situation in Asia, where many artists continued to think and paint in a very traditional way. To me, it boils down to the question you mentioned about how you see what you want to see. The material evolution—how we

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explore perception in terms of reformulating the art making process—to me, that is the most important.

It's about engaging space. These are the questions to be explored in terms of the way I look at media. Recently I saw the Matisse show at the Tate. I liked some of the larger paper cut works, which I had never seen at such a scale and in a group. It's incredible how he really was putting himself in a place as he physically cut those shapes out. There is an indirectness to the work as these are determined by all the cutout forms. His role changed—the cuts generated the unexpected. The artist self is not a protagonist. That is important if compared with the traditional feeling concerning the best way to approach drawing. Matisse was between himself and the actual medium, and in negotiation with a space.



Zheng Chongbin, "Dark Vein 001-002", ink on xuan paper, 245 x 328 cm, 2013. (Image courtesy the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing).

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CM: For me, a mistake that a lot of critics and academics make is that an artist, like a writer, needs to be in total, conscious control of a medium. But an artist is trying to do something different sometimes; it's about creating a situation for interpretation. Whereas philosophy is about answering questions, art is about asking them.

ZC: I use ink sometimes to cast a different surface with the paper just as a vehicle. But the unique thing is that ink can bleach through. It becomes a process of object-making rather than painting. The way I see ink, is that when it penetrates through to the paper, it has emerged as living organism. It's not the attitude, it's the act.

CM: Precisely—it's not random.

ZC: No. There is intention; some artists want to create a third zone between the actual thing you are doing and the extra thing you were perceiving. For this, facilitation is very important. In 2009/10 I made a video of grinding ink. When I was learning about art from my mentor he always said you must do it for a long time. Be patient; emulate the way they train the beginners learning Kung Fu in Shaolin Si [Shaolin Temple] that you see in the movies. They call it “qiao qiao”, like to re-habit, re-habit...almost like a “rehab session” [Laughs]. It makes you learn how to cool down and focus. You get the attitude ready, and facilitate what you want to do. You contemplate and understand before taking action.



Zheng Chongbin, “Lines with Volume”, ink and acrylic on xuan paper, 395 x 300 cm, 2011. (Image courtesy the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing).

“WenRenHua” painting as ideologies

CM: We need distinctions in order to be able to speak about things, but these distinctions also create a barrier when actually, the concepts are completely mixed. I’m thinking also about the creation of an art work, a third space, the price of being an artist; but there is also a sense when these works are being made—particularly what we call abstract painting—that there is a certain meditative state, a process of being part of the concept, as opposed to objectifying it.

ZC: Yes, I think we normally don’t describe spirituality...

CM: I’m trying to avoid saying “spiritual”...

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ZC: I go to all the cathedrals—my wife said if I view any more I will become Catholic—but it's such a unique experience; the light, the vertical lines and the organs. It's entire architecture. And then also you see the work—it's the best environment to hold your mind. There is also enormous scale. Before you walk in, you look at the exterior, then you walk in in peace, and you look at the interiors. And the painting is site specific. You are between the different spaces that have been transcended.

We have so much instant gratification [but] the physical world makes us really try to understand physics and phenomenology. In the '80s I was trying to work in media that brings out physicality. I used a huge amount of acrylic to try to “trash” the ink, which was not appreciated [at the academy] because ink had to be presented clean, placed layer-by-layer and translucent.

I really wanted to enforce the tangibility and physicality of the artwork. What is important to me—mass, weight and volume—all have to be placed in relation to the notion of the material phenomenon. In other words, we are talking about a third space which is less hands on. Wenrenhua [literati painting] is not about opinions, it's really about the ideologies—it cannot really be achieved. What can be learned from it is how to proceed; it almost became a starting point again to look at this notion and how to break out.

Recently I've been looking at Song [Dynasty] paintings. The view of looking out is incredible; at the beginning of modernism, you have Western scholars talking about Degas looking from the corner as a new vision! Song painting is really about perceiving—this will change your pictorial experience. We can actually push the painting and further a different experience. Crossing the boundary is always possible.



Zheng Chongbin in his studio. (Image courtesy Ink Studio).

The relationship between you and nature

ZC: To me ink media is no different from other media. It's really about how you try to understand that the relationship between you and nature is how you perceive things —how you define the place between you and viewers and how you want viewers to see. All this I think is more important to me than just the idea of painting.

CM: What is the nature of painting in this, because you are using ink and you are combining it with a very modern material, white acrylic paint, which is used like punctuation?

ZC: I think you raise a good point about how painting could mean anything. We always look at the historical perspectives; I look at artists like Mondrian. He talked about a natural reality and an abstract reality. What's a natural reality? He's learning from nature, but then there's abstract reality, which he wants to create, to actually take away from nature. But the nuances, the resonance and intensity of the media—the first time I saw his work I was surprised because I thought there was only pure color, but when you look at it closely, there are many layers on top of each other; he was particular about the phenomena of this medium he worked with.

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CM: And for Mondrian and lots of other painters—Pollock as well—there’s the experience of interacting with these works; certain areas as you stay with it over time recede, others advance, and none are stationary. Coming from different angles also changes the perception, but this is also a material change concerning how you understand what you’re looking at and experiencing.

ZC: Exactly! In Mondrian’s or Ad Reinhardt’s work, it radiates out. It’s not a flat black. Another example is Rothko, who I think had a really strong demand for emergence from media. Although his work is more existentially revealing.



Zheng Chongbin, “Three Planes”, ink and acrylic on xuan paper, 152 x 228 cm, 2012. (Image courtesy the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing).

Why I use ink

ZC: I use ink because it bears so much depth; it's infused with rich culture and memory. It can be differentiated not for differentiation's sake but for the depth that can really be possible, and for the whole perceived experience to change.

Again it's that frame of historical reference; traditional Chinese painting is always elusive, sucking you in. You have to really understand the poem, and be flowing with it. You "read" the painting, which is totally different from Western painting, which radiates outwards. We're talking about the way of seeing it—yes, it's a beautiful black with such depth, it's vital. But it's really about creating a space between you and the work, coming into real physical space, and whole experience and perception. I think ink has not achieved the level that I really want it to, and it fascinates me.



Zheng Chongbin, "Vortex", ink and acrylic on xuan paper, 179 x 179 cm, 2015. (Image courtesy the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing).

The scale and the void

CM: There's also the scale of traditional Chinese painting—it is a personal scale. And it is also a revealing scale because often they were on scrolls, and rarely were the scrolls completely unwound—it was a staged process, whereas some of your recent works are really huge. This changes it. A square centimeter of black is not as black as a square meter of black even though it's the exact same hue. You have this change. There's a feeling of being in a temple. Can you talk about scale? I think this is a key part of your recent work.

ZC: Yes, these pieces almost feel site-specific, because I wanted to scale [the paintings] to the wall and not only [in terms of] the work itself. That comes down to the mass—it's the volume, the weight, the gravity. It's not that I like to stay on the comfortable side, it's more a quantitative way of engaging with the surrounding space. It is an activation to the unseen [sic], which is equally important to the seen.

I think scale is very important to most of the work I do now; this inquiry stems from the work itself, especially regarding how it transcends the space or site. Furthermore, I'm trying to understand how light works with ink media. The void space can really be activated by media.

CM: You say a void—is it a negative space?

ZC: The void is the actual, architectural space that becomes part of the work and part of the experience. For [my show at Ink Studio](#), I will be creating only one installation in a big space, and will be using light and the reflection on the ink and also altering the architectural space as one piece.

CM: I am looking at this particular work and how there are large plains of black which don't all line up; they are also going over even bigger plains, like giant columns of ink that have been brushed down, but they also give you the impression of being scraped down, like a forest, up and down; whichever way you look, your whole plane of vision is taken up with vertical columns. Black voids or surfaces are imposed on top of this, almost like the black object in 2001: A Space Odyssey. It's a positive space but it also represents a totally negative space. In this ether, which is undefined, the way you come up with something negative is to make something that is very defined—a block.

And so it's the same sense of breaking the reality of the painting which is underneath these columns of ink that allow light through, that have a certain transparency, and then you bring in these big blocks to break that reality and stop one looking through to the trees (I say trees here only as a metaphor for the impression that is going on).

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ZC: I guess you can describe it in that way. I talk about the phenomenology of media which is particularly the xuan paper and ink, and how the ink flows and bleaches through. You can actually achieve this macro way and also in a very micro sort of vision of the effect.

But all this is actually in the process, which facilitates that without really controlling it. But what I wanted to achieve in the particular work you mention concerns verticality—again if you see the real work, your viewpoint is right in the middle of the paintings. But then you are looking up and you are looking down—there is a motion of verticality. And this is constantly extended.

CM: Did you paint it on a wall or on the ground?

ZC: This is a painting on the floor—actually all my works are painted on the floor. This is inevitable to me because water on a vertical surface is going to run all the way down to the bottom. I need the water to sit.

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Zheng Chongbin, "Slanted Light" 390 x 190 cm, 2015. (Image courtesy the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing).

Living in a myth

ZC: As I mentioned, a process is always irrational. You live in a myth and what you've done is sort of the myth, it is the puzzle. The important thing is to recognize how you will realize the material phenomenon. The experience you can get is so different.

CM: Could you talk about the new work you are planning.

ZC: Right now I'm trying to concentrate on next year because Ink Studio asked me to do another solo. I probably need to go back again to observe the light sources.

I'm thinking about how I can use ink to make the ink disappear, but at the same time make you realize the space is being transcended in terms of its light and geometrical depth. The shape of the wall will change and the lights will be intensified. Natural lights and also probably artificial light will be used to simulate daylight so that the form of the ink and its reflection can make you feel light as a substance.

CM: It is light as a particle as well as a beam...

ZC: It's the rays of light which are reflected by ink and also by the space; I am still trying to learn about the angle of reflection and saturation. But it's really about methodologies—through them I aim to come up with strategies.

It's taking the perceptive experience but really understanding ink and how it can be expanded in a real and a tangible way—that's one of my intentions. And then there are my paintings, relating to the synthesis of the media as light, motion and space.

Changing the form of practice

CM: Have you been looking at James Turrell?

ZC: I went to the LACMA to see his show; I liked it better than the Guggenheim one, which was a bit staged. Of course, there is Robert Irwin. He is really a thinker. They say that James Turrell turned light into media and that Robert Irwin is turning media into light.

I think that that is the vital impression. We are not focused today on the serenity of the work—it is more about pushing the boundary of our feeling and capacity. Robert Irwin is going beyond the work itself How can we blur the territories? He is an almighty inspiration. What makes an artist interesting, I think, is engaging the subject deeply and having an attitude of constant challenge—working in both internal and external ways.

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It's at the level of communication. We are looking at contemporary culture today; we need to learn something more about ink art. As a Chinese artist with traditional training, how can ink be conveyed for the present and in a language we can all experience? It's extremely important. Hopefully I still believe in the ink medium; but it's not really about ink per se.

John Cage was very taken by Chinese philosophy, but did he emphasize Chinese philosophy? No. It was a change in method which enabled him and illuminated the form of his practice. His work focused on ourselves at the very present moment. That is what it is very important to think about.

Endnotes

1. Britta Erickson in Zheng Chongbin: Form, Matter, Impulse, Ink Studio: Beijing, 2014.



Zheng Chongbin, "Folding landscape" 348 x 140 cm, 2013 .(Image courtesy the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing).