

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

Art in America

Van Proyen, Mark, "Zheng Chongbin" *Art in America*, May 30, 2011

[Home](#) | [Art in America](#)

Zheng Chongbin

By *Mark Van Proyen*  May 30, 2011 4:21pm



For the past two decades, **Zheng Chongbin** has divided his practice between studios in Shanghai and the Bay Area, synthesizing Chinese and northern Californian modes of abstract painting. His recent exhibition of eight ink-on-paper paintings mounted on panel was a tour de force, revealing how the techniques of traditional Asian ink painting can have a contemporary relevance. Zheng applies black ink of various consistencies to sheets of Xuan paper (made from sandalwood fiber), which for over 1,000 years has been the preferred support for calligraphic ink painting, owing to the way that it reveals both the flow and the crispness of an artist's brushwork. Like master painters of the Sung and Yuan dynasties, Zheng changes the tempo of his brushwork to create an elegant choreography of shapes that bespeak what ancient scholars referred to as "landscapes of the mind."

With assistance from a master craftsman, Zheng then mounts his painted Xuan paper onto panels, with multiple sheets on each, in a way that emphasizes the interconnectedness of flowing abstract forms while also showing subtle disjunctions that occur from sheet to sheet. The flowing forms clearly allude to distant landscapes shrouded in evanescent atmospherics, and they invite the viewer's imagination to wander into and through them. But the disjunctions between the sheets of paper, coupled with a kind of phosphorescent marbling effect created by judiciously applied white acrylic paint, bring the viewer back to the work's surface. This oscillation between material fact and lyrical allusiveness is experienced with each of the paintings on view, a point underscored by the exhibition's title: "Obtrusive and Elusive."

The largest paintings in Zheng's exhibition were also the most impressive. *Tour* (2011) is a panoramic composition at slightly less than 3 by 15 feet, featuring a somewhat more extreme tonal contrast than is visible in the other works. Through the elegant undulation of forms, the eye travels across zones defined by rich saturations of black ink and to others offering free-flowing, midtone shapes that are a contemporary echo of Sung portrayals of the Yangtze River Gorge, only here there is but a vague allusion to the landscape. Instead, we see an emphasis on the revelation of geomantic energies that ancient Chinese philosophers claimed were at the core of all natural entities. The other large painting, *Stained No. 5* (2009), is a vertical composition that takes the viewer's eye on a sublime journey, beginning with the clearly defined gestural shapes inhabiting the lower left corner and moving upward to the imaginary skies.

Photo: Zheng Chongbin: *Stained No. 5*, 2009, ink, ink wash and acrylic on paper, 146 by 111½ inches; at **Cheryl Haines**.