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San Francisco Chronicle

Bravo, Tony, "Spring marks return of big exhibitions, new takes in visual arts world" *San Francisco Chronicle Datebook*, March 22, 2021

ART & EXHIBITS

Spring marks return of big exhibitions, new takes in visual arts world

Tony Bravo | March 22, 2021 Updated: March 23, 2021, 11:00 am

Local artist Randy Wong-Westbrooke, a lobby designer, attends the fully installed "Immersive Van Gogh" experience at SVN West in San Francisco.
Photo: Yalonda M. James / The Chronicle

After a year of uncertainty for Bay Area visual arts venues, there is some optimism. As museums reopen, once on-hold exhibition schedules are beginning to fill, and long-empty galleries return to 25% capacity. Long-awaited shows like "Last Supper in Pompeii" at the Legion of Honor will

also finally get presented this season as well as new pop offerings like “Immersive Van Gogh,” the projected art attraction at SVN West.

Also making delayed debuts will be two outdoor sculpture spaces: the renovated gardens at the Oakland Museum of California and the East West Bank Art Terrace at the Asian Art Museum by Kulapat Yantrasast. Dates are still to be determined for both.

Here are some highlights from the coming season:

Zheng Chongbin's installation “I Look for the Sky,” now on view at the Asian Art Museum.
Photo: Asian Art Museum

Asian Art Museum

‘Zheng Chongbin: I Look for the Sky’

How artists think about space is the central question in a two-part exhibition by Marin County artist Zheng Chongbin. The installation includes videos, projections and 5,000 square feet of vinyl and scrim suspended beneath the building skylights exploring how manipulation of light and space can alter our perceptions.

Now on view.

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THE DAILY CALIFORNIAN

Fay, Blue, "'Beyond Confinement': An Interview with Zheng Chongbin," *The Daily Californian*, May 15, 2020

A&E / VISUAL ART

'Beyond Confinement': An Interview with Zheng Chongbin

ZHENG CHONGBIN | COURTESY

BLUE FAY | ARTS REPORTER MAY 15, 2020

Zheng Chongbin is an artist who can see between light and space.

In an interview with The Daily Californian, the installation artist talked about his two upcoming works at the Asian Art Museum: "I Look for the Sky" and "State of Oscillation." The works have been delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but Zheng is optimistic that the project is moving forward and that the nature of his installations may even work well with social distancing practices.

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Technically, the show should have been completed by now, but given the scope of the global public health crisis, the project has been temporarily put on hold. Zheng recognizes that this is a reality every program and institution is facing, but he does not see it as an insuperable barrier to his work.

"Everything is ready," Zheng assured. "In a few weeks, we will start installing."

Zheng is deeply connected to the way art interacts with light — in terms of both materiality and meaning.

"Light became media, and media became the light, in that kind of alternation," Zheng explained. "And what about us? Are we part of that alternation too?"

Zheng positions his audience as the third dimension of his installation. As the light changes throughout the day, so too does the image of the installation, and by extension, the experience of the viewer. Zheng's work is driven by a keen interest in geometry, mathematics and ordered systems — and ways to disrupt them. The first of his upcoming works at the Asian Art Museum is formed by the architecture of the museum itself, but it also creates a uniquely nonsymmetrical space of its own.

"I Look for the Sky" is a site-specific installation suspended in a corridor of the museum. Zheng described how the seven modules that make up the installation come together to create different shapes and patterns and draw from the natural light of the museum.

"I use the carbon tube to build the structures, but there is certain spaces missing, certain spaces suggested," he said. "When you rotate the modular, you view looking at different rotations and you have a different experience looking at the geometry. You won't recognize one side from the other."

Zheng's promise that no single view of "I Look for the Sky" is the same as any other may in fact be what makes the installation a good fit for these strange and harrowing times. When asked if he is concerned about the possibility that restrictions around social gathering might significantly alter museumgoers' abilities to experience the piece, Zheng explained that the nature of the installation might actually lend itself to social distancing.

"(The installation) is a highly suggestive movement, and audiences will be walking and viewing it from different positions," he said. "The piece has generated the kind of suggestion that encourages you to walk through the piece, looking in different directions rather than just staying in one place."

Zheng imagines his installation not only as a movement, but as a conversation, something capable of making suggestions to its viewers and guiding them to explore new facets of its anatomy.

He went on to liken the experience of moving through "I Look for the Sky" to experiencing an outdoor space.

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"It's also same thing, you walk in a garden, especially along a path. In this case, it's open lobbies, but it does generate the kind of experience you want to move around," Zheng said. "That is kind of the unity of the work, and the viewers are actually a flowing kind of elements."

Zheng also explained how viewing "I Look for the Sky" is different from experiencing art in a traditional gallery setting. Normally, the viewer stands in front of a work of art and views it perpendicularly.

"This piece has every face surface, every shape, every angle that you can engage with," he added. "They are all changing in different layers and dimensionalities and in the way you perceive (them). Even going to the second floor on the bridge, you won't see the light, but you will see the anatomy of the piece."

The anatomy of the piece contains chaotic elements, which can be experienced from different levels. The piece contains elements that resemble organic structures — fractals — and geometric shapes. These elements manifest a relationship of order and chaos, especially when viewed from higher levels in the museum.

Zheng describes the piece as something "you walk into." This entrance into a work of art reflects Zheng's larger philosophy about why he makes art — as a way to evolve and go beyond one's own experience.

"With my painting, I'm not really painting pictures," Zheng explained. "I want to see what the painting becomes. It's something of a suggestion."

Zheng's art harnesses the power of suggestion with the ability to extract the viewer from their immediate circumstances in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"You can go beyond what confinement is," Zheng said. "Art is a kind of vehicle."

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ORIENTATIONS

Wai-Ying Beres, Tiffany, "Materials of Inspiration: Zheng Chongbin" *Orientations*, July/August 2017

Interview
Jun 30

Materials of Inspiration: Zheng Chongbin

Contemporary artist Zheng Chongbin (b. 1961, Shanghai) has turned Chinese painting inside out, focusing on its materials and surface, the performance and process of painting. Zheng's practice encompasses abstract painting using traditional ink and acrylic on paper, as well as large-scale installations with ink, video or other materials. His installations were recently exhibited at the 2016 Shanghai Biennale and the 2015 Venice Biennale, at the Palazzo Bembo.

Having lived in two cultures, Zheng has been deeply influenced by both Chinese and Western traditions. Trained in classical Chinese painting, he was once a teacher of figure painting in the Department of Chinese Painting at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, Hangzhou (now the China Academy of Art). During the 1980s he began to experiment, painting abstracted figures and deconstructing the orthodoxy of his painterly practice. Zheng's artistic experiments continued, and in 1988 he moved to the US, becoming the first international fellow of the San Francisco Art Institute, where he received his MFA. Immersed in the world of contemporary art theory, Zheng found some of the answers he was looking for in the work of Western abstract expressionists like Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell and Franz Kline. Today, Zheng—an international artist with studios in both the California Bay Area and Shanghai—creates art that has been said to be 'universally appreciated by Chinese and non-Chinese audiences'.

On a visit to his California warehouse studio earlier this year, surrounded by shipping crates, piles of paper and other objects, Tiffany Wai-Ying Beres talked to Zheng about his creative inspiration.

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Zheng Chongbin in his California studio

Tiffany Wai-Ying Beres You have a great many objects in your studio. Do you consider yourself a collector?

Zheng Chongbin No—my notion of collectors is that they collect systematically. If they are true collectors, they should study and be dedicated to the process, building their collections based on precision and taste … in a way, a collection is in itself almost an art form. It is the creation of something more meaningful than what one or two objects are alone. A collection is a reflection of the collector's artistic sensibility. It is a kind of process of artistic creation.

I, on the other hand, like to collect work in relation to what I do. It is almost like my collections are part of my art material, or a mental engagement with my own art process. There is no real logic behind the objects. My collection is more about inspiration. Ultimately, I want to turn these things into actions—these are things that may change or influence my own work.

TWB It's fun to look at your workspace because of all the interesting objects around. This ornate clock, for instance—where does it come from?

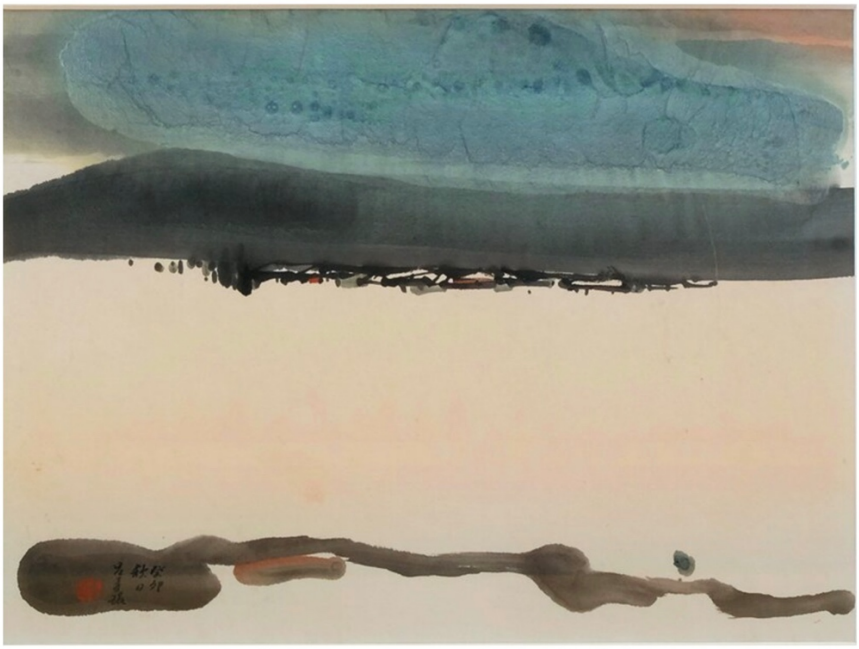
ZCB The clock came from the antique shop that used to be next door. It is a cast-iron table clock made in America. I collected it not because I like the clock—I mean, I do like the clock—but what I like more is the ticking sound and its sense of time. There's length, there's a

ticking sound that reverberates. I love it. At one point I wanted to make a video incorporating the sound, but in the end I didn't.

The clock uses a wind-up mechanism. In a way, I'd like to think this kind of mechanical system also affects human behaviour. I have to turn the key every two weeks, and now it has become a habit. Every time I go on a trip, the first thing I do when I return is turn the key to tighten the spring.

TWB And what about this ink box on your desk?

ZCB It's from a classmate who has left this world—Jiang Jin. It is sentimental. He gave it to me in the '90s when he came to California for an exhibition I helped set up. He won the national championship for calligraphy in China, and was a brilliant calligrapher, painter and scholar of classical literature. There are lots of things here that have stories and subjective meaning.



Abstract Island
By Lui Shou-kwan (1919–75), 1963
Chinese ink and colour on paper, 36.5 x 47 cm

TWB You are a contemporary artist, but do you realize that what you see from your desk is stacks of Chinese *xuan* paper, hundreds of bottles of ink and your brushpot full of brushes—in other words traditional materials?

ZCB That's true! Actually, from the very beginning when I first started art as a kid, there was always this connection to materials. Before my first lesson, my teacher sent me to the store with a list of things to buy—three basic brushes, an inkstick, paints and so on. Look, here's the first inkstone I bought, in the 1970s in Shanghai. But I kept them under my bed for a year. Before I could paint, I was only allowed to study and practise calligraphy, using other materials. Periodically, I would take the painting materials out and admire them. It was a treasure box!

I still treasure these materials. I think the reason I have stuck with ink all these years is because of my relationship to it. But now ink is no longer just a language, a medium or a material—the reason I choose ink is because it has to do with my identity; moreover, in the context of contemporary art there are huge possibilities that have not yet been realized with ink. It is a liquid with interesting forms, geometries and different behaviours. I like thinking about ink in ways you wouldn't normally: about the way it settles on the paper, about painting in non-traditional ways, about lines and calligraphy, about how you exercise your relationship with nature within the framework of Chinese philosophy ... Although I have been working in video installation and mixed media in relation to the meaning of materiality, these are also in some way linked to traditional practice. I see my art as breaking down the medium specificity by engaging with ink in untraditional ways. This is something I want to push further.

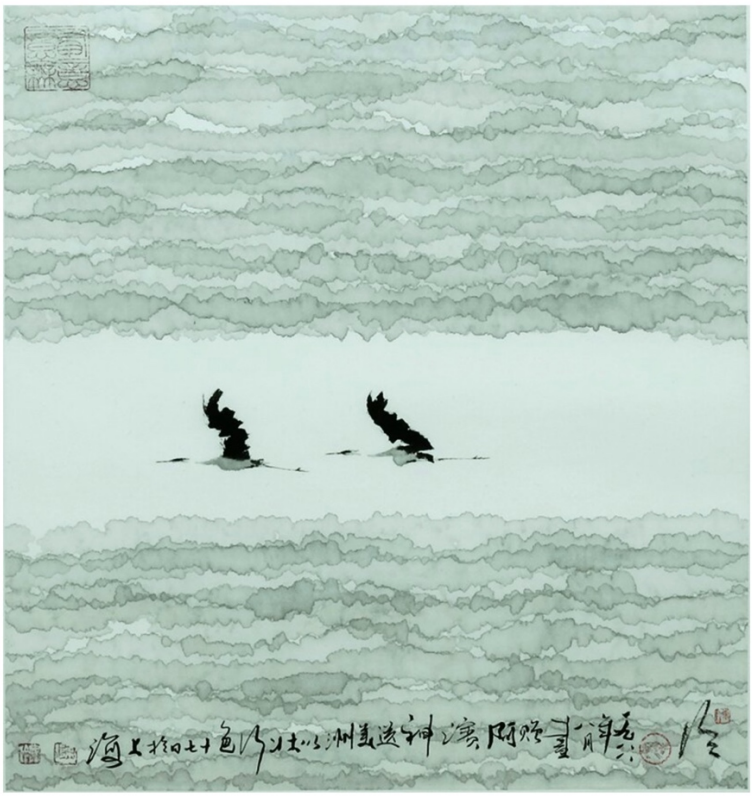
TWB Ink and traditional materials are so important to you, and yet I don't see any Chinese paintings here.

ZCB I don't have many Chinese paintings, but I do have a few by Lui Shou-kwan [1919–75]. I like his work because he isn't afraid of blankness—whole sections are pure white. For him, it's not about light, but the notion of space. How do you interpret space in a Chinese painting? There are no boundaries. I think he is one of the pioneers of modern Chinese ink painting because he saw this blankness for its boundless possibilities and took advantage of that freedom. There is also a great sense of purity in these ink surfaces, and yet the translucency emits the qualities of space and light. Lui pushed traditional language further to be more expressive and physical. He had a very different focus to other artists at that time.

TWB Is Lui Shou-kwan the only Chinese painter in your collection?

ZCB The only other Chinese painting that I have is by Chen Jialing [b. 1937], my former private teacher. He was teaching at Shanghai Academy of Art at the time. It was his gift of hope and encouragement to me when I left China for the States, and I think it is one of his best works. It is not like his later work, with all the colours and the focus on mannerism. This work is beautiful in the way the water and sky are painted—the stain of the water marks, and the different layers of ink. The brushwork is really beautiful—it's autonomous and controlled at the same time, with horizontal lines such that only water and ink can create. Also, there are

two flying cranes, which I think Chen painted to represent my wife and me leaving China. It is interesting to be a character in an artwork. The birds are tiny, but the painting is incredible. I guess this is the first artwork I ever possessed. It's been with me all these years.



Untitled
By Chen Jialing (b. 1937), 1988
Chinese ink on paper, 48 x 45 cm

TWB If you could collect the work of any traditional Chinese artist, who would it be?

ZCB I would probably collect Shitao [1642–1707] or Bada Shanren [1626–1705]. I love their works the most—even their very small pieces. I particularly like their albums. I have a Shitao book at home, and I flip through the pages almost every day. The works I like best are not his early ones, which have a more traditional composition—I much prefer the works that have a feeling of being incomplete, that extend beyond the paper.

TWB What was the first Western work you collected?

ZCB It was actually an exchange with another artist. It was in the late '90s, when I had a studio on San Francisco's Potrero Avenue, which I shared with other artists. This artist did a kind of calligraphy—she wrote in a very awkward way because she had injured her right [dominant] hand. She began to use her left hand, and would just write whatever came into her mind. It was kind of political, feminist, and abstract, too. At the time, I was working on my 'Blot Series'. I liked the idea of escaping the intentional. These 'auto'-paintings, painted in a state that the artist did not control, were intriguing. Also there was this bodily experience in terms of working with the media, because of her hand injury.

TWB It sounds as if you are interested in collecting art that resonates with your own?

ZCB I've never really thought about collecting art for the sake of collecting. I am not really in a position to do that. For me, it is more about the dialogue—it is something you live with, to enjoy and that inspires. For me, it is more interesting to have something that serves a purpose rather than being tucked away somewhere. In other words, I don't really look at these things as objects I own. It is a very different kind of psychological relationship: they become part of my life. You hear about collectors who are so passionate that they would do almost anything to get a piece. That's not me.

To me, creating art is the most important part of my life, so anything I collect must have some engagement with my own art. There should be something that it can bring to my own artwork. It is almost like my collection is my art material.

Le Soleil Levant (Harbour Scene with Rising Sun)
By Claude Lorrain (1600–82), 1634
Etching and drypoint, 13.5 x 20.5 cm

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TWB I am looking at this very classical-seeming work—what is this piece and how does it relate as art material?

ZCB It's an etching by the landscape artist Claude Lorrain [1600–82]. Lorrain was a French painter and engraver of the Baroque era—a contemporary of the Dutch Golden Age painters. This is Lorrain's fifth plate, which is why it is still quite sharp. Apparently it used to be in the Hermitage collection, but in the 1920s the Russians needed hard currency so they sold many pieces. I was introduced to a dealership by one of my collector friends, and I immediately fell in love. Lorrain was a landscape artist, and one of his favourite topics is painted seaports. What I love is his atmospheric scenery and the light always on the horizon, the way he painted the sky.

TWB It is interesting that a 17th century etching would resonate so strongly with a painter trained in classical Chinese painting, particularly figure painting.

ZCB [When I was studying art] I did a lot of landscape painting and drawing in Tibet—the sky is always a big part of the narrative for landscape painting—so it is something I can relate to because of all of the representational work I used to do. When I see this work, it recalls [Chinese] Song [dynasty; 960–1279] painting and the way we look at nature, the different views. In the Western world, there is a kind of vision of symmetry, logic, and idealized order that makes it work. This work reminds me of the contemporary relevance of Western art history, and my desire to try to understand more. Moreover, the piece itself is exceptionally well drawn. It is a historical work that relates to light and nature, and I feel very connected to that. I keep the piece in the hallway at home, where I walk into the bedroom.

It is also as if something is coming out of the representational in this work, although I tend to look at its abstraction too. I find this work and its atmosphere to be very impressionistic. It's so transcendent it's almost divine, almost religious, as if he has given a biblical voice to his homogenized landscape. It has a phenomenological quality. Back then, they had ideas about the perfect world and tried to capture that quality in their art. When you see Lorrain's use of light versus how I use light, it is less about ideas—it's part of the conscious reality. The experience is important—it's like your body is actually in the space. It's very direct, like your existence is part of it.

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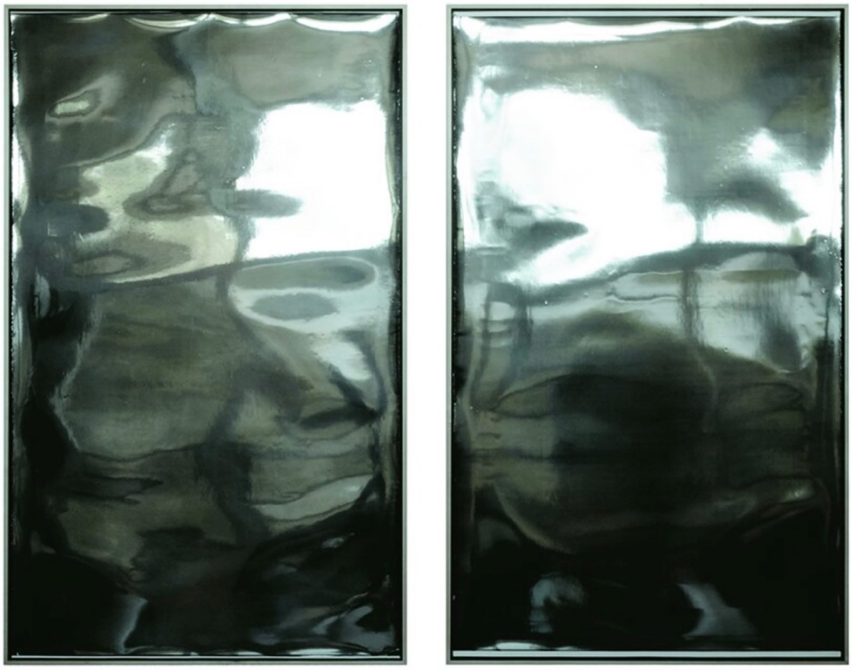

Study for a Mirror
By Coen Young (b. 1988), 2015
Acrylic, marble dust, enamel and paper, each: 194.3 x 115.6 cm

TWB I still think it is interesting that you find inspiration in a work so different from your own.

ZCB I have another very different work at home, a big contemporary work done by Coen Young [b. 1988], a young Australian artist. I appreciated this work because it is another reminder of how to deal with abstraction and light. I bought it during the previous Art Basel Hong Kong. Young uses marble dust and graphite and applies it on very thick paper. The surface is beautiful—it is glossy but has a lot of hues and depth. It is also minimal. I don't know the exact application process, but the work is polished so that the surface becomes like Mylar—very reflective. It is almost like an antique mirror in the way that the image is obscured. I installed it in such a way that there is some distance when you look at it. Now it is in the living room, so that it is part of the space. Originally, the work came floating in an acrylic box with a very thin frame, which I removed so that it could have maximum exposure.

I suppose why I like both these works is because I've always been interested in the reflection of light and the engaging of space. Claude Lorrain and Coen Young are both exploring these, too. The notion of space is one of the most essential questions in contemporary art. There is always something pulling from one point to the other. To me, it is about continuation and

flow. There is some time basis. Even when I do video work, there is time and space as the frame changes. When I look at these works, I think about space.

TWB What about three-dimensional space? Your works take on many dimensionalities, but we've mainly discussed paintings.

ZCB There is a particular piece in my collection, *Untitled* [2007], a sculpture by a close friend of mine who I consider to be my mentor—Peter De Swart (b. 1949). A deep thinker and free spirit, he is an exceptional artist based in Northern California. We regularly visit each other's studios to discuss art and other related subjects. I often find his in-depth analysis and interdisciplinary understanding of art-making inspiring. *Untitled* is carved from multiple pieces of wood. I find it reminiscent of the work of the surrealist artist René Magritte [1898–1967], particularly his *The False Mirror* [1928]. The difference here is the door as the front layer of the eye, which you can open to see the secret inner eye. In this case, it alludes to the erotic consciousness with its iconic imagery and the power of enigma.

TWB Enigma and depth … So the key is that your collection feeds your imagination and spirit of inquiry?

ZCB Every object I own is something I feel I can relate to. I don't really see the objects as sentimental, but the fact that they move me means there is an emotional layer to the work too. To me, these artworks are always alive.

All images are © and courtesy of Zheng Chongbin Studio.

Untitled
By Peter De Swart (b. 1949), 2007
Wood and metal, 32.4 x 59.7 x 20.3 cm

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燃点 Ran Dian

"Zheng Chongbin: The Classical Origins of Contemporary Abstraction," *Ran Dian*, July 20, 2017 (excerpt)

Zheng Chongbin: The Classical Origins of Contemporary Abstraction

It is too early to decide if I am destroying the tradition of ink painting.

—Zheng Chongbin [1]

It is hard to understate how controversial Zheng Chongbin's abstract ink painting is in relation to China's two-millennia-old tradition of brush-and-ink-based art:

His forms have reached pure abstraction, severing any mimetic ties to nature or natural forms;
He abandons traditional brushwork and in the process absents the artist's ego, along with the calligraphic gesture that signifies it;
He sullies the material purity of the age-tested trifecta of calligraphic brush, ink, and paper by introducing a modern material-white acrylic;
He leaves little of the painted surface untouched, so that empty ground no longer serves as a space of generative emptiness; and
He exchanges the subjective space of mental interpretation for the concrete space of sense experience.

Not wantonly but systematically, he seems to question, one by one, the conceptual foundations of classical Chinese ink painting. And yet somehow, Zheng Chongbin manages to create images, forms, and objects that not only embody an ancient Chinese cosmogony but simultaneously reflect our contemporary human experience. How is this possible?

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燃点 Ran Dian

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

Zheng Chongbin—Myth, Matter, Medium

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 Chian.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 Westerly; 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 asthe1970s"anti black painting movement"), construction in the 1990s(e.g"New Elite painting") and morerecentlyreconstruction. Notable among this new generation are artists such as Yang Jiechang 杨诘苍 (b.1956) from Guangzhou and QiuZhijie 邱志杰 (b.1969) and ZhengChongbin (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 ZhengChongbinmoved 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

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).

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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.

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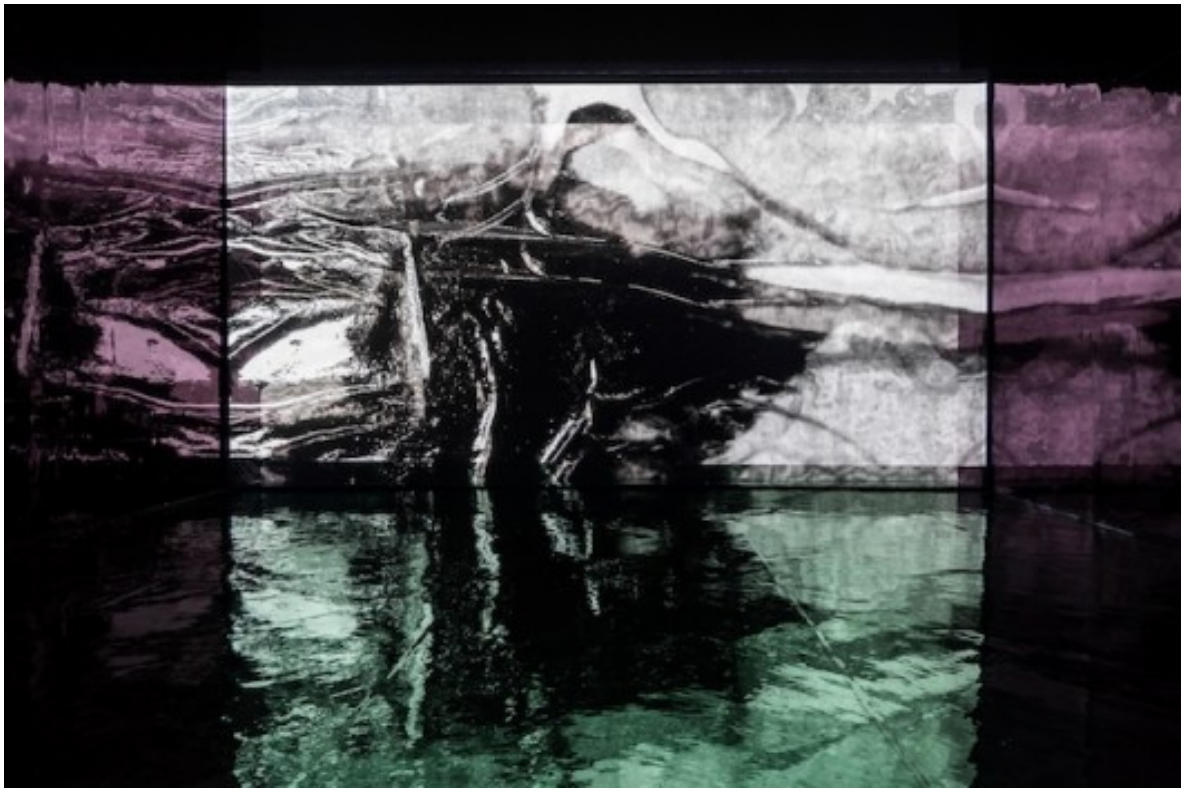
Zheng Chongbin, "5 definitions", ink and acrylic on xuan paper, 287 x 292 cm, 2012. (Image courtesy the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing).

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

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).

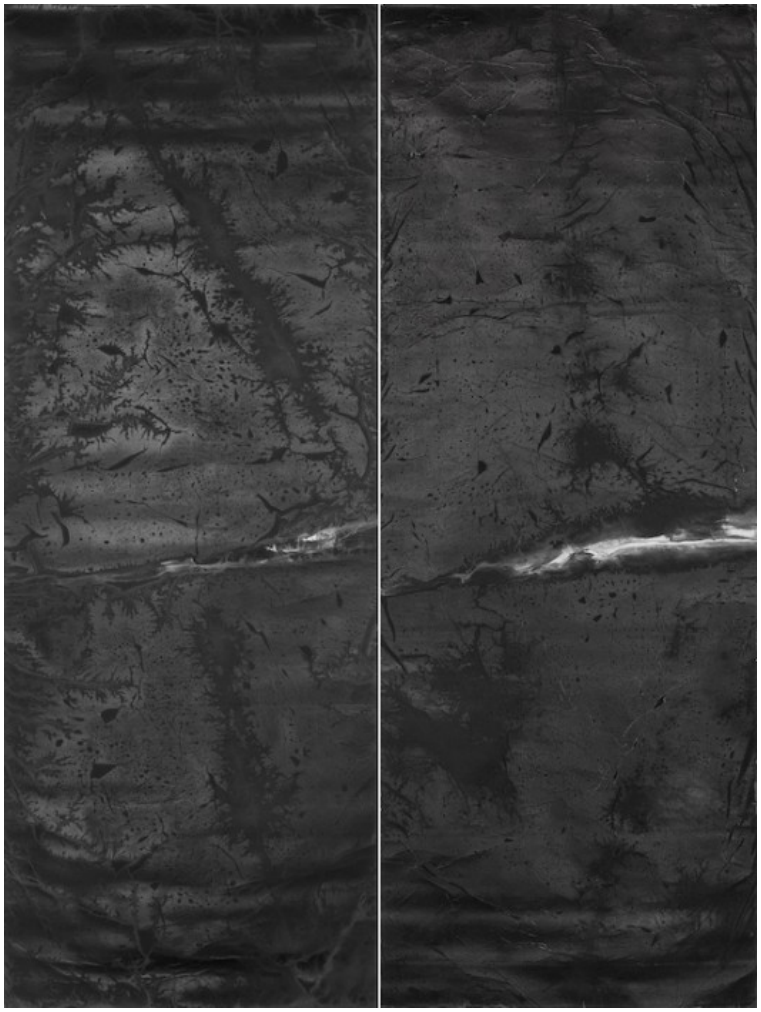
Breaking the rules

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

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).

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.

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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).

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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).

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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.

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).

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WSJ

Wang, Olivia, "A Spirit in the Dark," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 11, 2015

ART REVIEW Follow

A Spirit in the Dark

Chinese artist Zheng Chongbin's works are radical interpretations of Chinese ink art's classical form, focusing on ink not as a medium but as physical matter.

By Olivia Wang
March 11, 2015 1:23 pm ET

Save

Shanghai

With his shoulder-length wavy hair, hoop earring and goatee, one wouldn't expect Zheng Chongbin to be so mild-mannered and soft-spoken. For an artist of his accomplishment, he is almost shy, yet he possesses a quiet charisma. Over a lunch of smoked fish that he insisted I must try, we discuss his art and his next exhibition, to be held in May. Deboning the fish with the intense and consummate skill of a surgeon, he speaks with incisive, eager eyes.

Mr. Zheng's sensibility is influenced both by Chinese and Western artistic practices—two traditions that are, on the surface, at odds with each other. But Mr. Zheng finds their affinities and brings them together. What results is a unique and dynamic perspective.

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Mr. Zheng's approach reflects his bicultural education. Born in 1961 here in Shanghai, Mr. Zheng trained as an ink painter at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou. He later received a master's in fine arts from the San Francisco Art Institute. This synthesis of East and West has allowed him to draw parallels between the Abstract expressionists and Chinese literati painters. For example, Mr. Zheng sees similarities between Jackson Pollock and Bada Shanren, a 17th-century Chinese artist who, after the fall of the Ming dynasty, used painting as a means of protesting the new Manchu rule. Just as Pollock channeled his anger and energy onto the canvas, Mr. Zheng explains, Bada expressed his frustration and dissatisfaction for the new regime through disturbing, physically charged brushstrokes. Both artists have created works whose energy emanates far beyond the confines of their canvas or paper surface. "It is not about what they paint," Mr. Zheng says. "It's about how they paint."

Mr. Zheng's own practice has evolved over years. As an undergraduate he studied figure painting. Then for several years afterward he focused on conceptual and installation art. But Mr. Zheng is best-known for his radical interpretation of the classical ink-painting form. Combining a monochromatic ink palette with white acrylic and using techniques of collage, paper-soaking and paint-layering, Mr. Zheng creates intricate, abstract paintings. This is encapsulated in "Season" (2014), in which Mr. Zheng plays with layers and textures, bringing out the tensions between light and dark, ink and acrylic, translucency and opacity. The work is composed of vertical panes. On one side are soft, fluid washes of gray ink. In the middle, the ink is layered with white acrylic. The final panel is saturated in ink—the blackness is dense yet iridescent. The effect is abstract, bold and enthralling.

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'Season' (2014) by Zheng Chongbin. PHOTO: ZHENG CHONGBIN

Many Chinese contemporary artists are involved in a revival of Chinese ink painting, drawing inspiration from antiquity. Known as "contemporary ink," an increasing number of museums are staging exhibitions dedicated to this genre—including, most recently, the 2013 "Ink Art" show at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. But Mr. Zheng's intention is not to revive traditional ink painting so much as to forge a path that is completely his own, focusing instead on ink not as a medium but as physical matter. He brings forth the tactile nature of ink, amplifying its volume, texture and depth. There is a three-dimensional sculptural presence to his work.

Mr. Zheng has also been making increasingly innovative use of light in some of his works. He finds deep inspiration in the natural light and landscape of Northern California (where he has lived since the early 1990s), to the paintings of Caravaggio and Turner and the Light and Space Movement. Ink and light play an equal role in Mr. Zheng's work. To him, they are both formless, adaptable and with depth. In "Wordless, Formless" (2015), Mr. Zheng created installations that employ light to further enhance the sculptural potential of ink, changing appearance as the observer moves around them.

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"Wordless, Formless" will be shown in May as part of Mr. Zheng's solo exhibition at Beijing's Ink Studio. That same month, Mr. Zheng's work will be included in group shows at Daimler Contemporary in Berlin and at the Venice Biennale. This comes after the Los Angeles County Museum of Art recently acquired "Turbulence" (2013), one of Mr. Zheng's major works.

While its connection to the East may not always be palpable in Mr. Zheng's art, one critical principle of Chinese ink has remained constant throughout: *qiyun*, or "resonance of the spirit." This is the energy and life that resonates from an artwork. When I ask how one can discern whether this resonance is present, Mr. Zheng smiles and responds: "You can just feel it."

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Cover: Installing Bingyi's *Cascade* at the Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago. Photo: Adam Sokol. Courtesy of the artist and the Smart Museum of Art, Chicago.

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Collette Chattopadhyay

Zheng Chongbin: Defining His Own Terrain

Installation view of the Zheng Chongbin exhibition, White Ink, at the Chinese Cultural Center, San Francisco.

Zheng Chongbin's new large-scale, contemporary ink paintings convey a cultural complexity that mingles the knowledge and study of contemporary global history with a broad cognizance of not only traditional and contemporary Chinese art, but an in-depth familiarity with contemporary Euro-American art of recent decades. While tradition is manifest in the physical properties of his ink on *xuan* paper works, his paintings reveal an artistic imagination that seamlessly crosses the usual cultural divides. The bold and engaging works assembled for the artist's exhibition at the Chinese Cultural Center in San Francisco (May 19 to July 30, 2011) present his newest ideas in relation to both a reconsideration of inherited artistic canons and the identification of promising directions for ink painting in the contemporary context.

Zheng Chongbin emerged on the art world stage in the 1980s, when the subjectivism of Neo-Expressionist painting took the American and European art worlds by storm. It was also the decade that saw the

Zheng Chongbin, *Tour*, 2010, ink and acrylic on *xuan* paper, 71.1 x 391.16 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chinese Cultural Center, San Francisco.

emergence in China of New Wave (*xinchao*) art. Both visual art movements utilized abstraction as a means to subjectively interpret often personal, but also at times collective, histories, experiences, and memories. And both located meaning in abstracted forms rendered with large, expressive brushstrokes. Zheng Chongbin's works of that period visually presented moments of cathartic experience rendered in ink paintings wrought on a large scale, reflecting the visual *zeitgeist* of the '85 New Wave Movement in China and the Neo-Expressionist movement that simultaneously arose in the US and Europe. Both developments validate immediacy—as opposed to vicarious experience—and interpret these moments as insights that lead towards profound interpretations of existence.

Yet the works that form the focus of this exhibition gather their energy from more than the present and its political affairs. Indeed, while these new paintings can be visually explosive in their force, some of the works explore more complex themes related to concepts of historical artistic endurance, relevance, and power. This happens, for example, in the dramatic work named *Tour,*(2010) where Zheng Chongbin tests his artistic strength against the Sung dynasty masters Kuo Hsi and Tung Yuan, and the Qing master, Shi Tao. Postmodern in its abstraction, Zheng Chongbin's painting combines and visually paraphrases all three mentors, simultaneously paying tribute to these legendary artists, while exercising considerable conceptual heft with postmodern ease. Zheng Chongbin's internalization of Shi's conceptual challenges to the tradition of ink painting are so complete that visible traces of the master's influence are muted. Yet, the most primal of Shi Tao's assumptions, namely a transgressive attitude towards tradition, remains one of Zheng Chongbin's guiding lights, granting him permission to develop his own approach to ink painting that is marked by a contemporary ironic questioning of inherited aesthetic principles.

Zheng Chongbin's new works utilize visual overstatement and understatement as a means of defining new terrain by probing vistas that have remained predominately off limits for centuries in a painting tradition that boasts a formidable history. He dares, for example, to present the suite of *Black Paintings* as well as the suite of *White Paintings*, both of which break with tradition's attenuated insistence upon cultivated modulations of

tone for an overall image whose objective was, traditionally speaking, the articulation of cultural refinement. To those attuned to the classical legacy of ink brush painting, the visual roar of these works may seem like fighter jets taking off on an airport runway.

Simultaneously, these works expand the parameters of traditional ink painting by presenting images that appear to exist in the darkest of spaces or, conversely, in the brightest of white light. Considering visual overstatement and understatement as defined within the parameters of the ink tradition, works in this exhibition explore ink's capability to address the postmodern era's brash harshness and its frequent neglect and disregard for sophistication and subtlety. Working exclusively with black and white hues, two new series within Zheng Chongbin's work reference these realities in artistic terms, offering in certain respects a sharp critique of the contemporary world itself.

Zheng Chongbin, *Eroded Black*, 2011, ink and acrylic on *xuan* paper, 139.7 x 97.79 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chinese Cultural Center, San Francisco.

The *Eroded Black* paintings travel into these new territories, upending some of the most cherished values of China's centuries' old tradition of ink painting. Here, ponderous black charcoal forms parade across the image space, and gone or suppressed is any interest in the subtlety of balancing and counterbalancing compositional forms that is central to traditional ink painting. Instead, Zheng Chongbin's new *Black* works project a dense, claustrophobic, foreboding psychological reality. If the work references a physical reality, it is surely one of the darkest of nights. The images project a sense of brutality that carries with it suggestions of oblivion. Physically, the ink is thick and visceral, built up with so many layers that the *xuan* paper base has at times given way, torn and ripped in places under the painter's insistent brushwork.

Like celluloid film fluttering through the projector spokes after a movie has come to its end, the dark vertical forms flicker in the mind's eye. They are oddly reminiscent of Robert Rauschenberg's early all-white paintings, which dared viewers to go beyond literal reality toward the metaphysical by means of a homogenous field of colour. Do Zheng Chongbin's works mine the obverse of those early postmodern American impulses or do they converse with Antoni Tapies's paintings resembling walls or other mundane, obdurate realities? Certainly, Zheng Chongbin's new works give the viewer pause to reflect.

Opposite: Zheng Chongbin, *Light, Dark, Dry, Wet*, 2010, ink and acrylic on *xuan* paper, 241.3 x 129.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chinese Cultural Center, San Francisco.

Zheng Chongbin, *Untitled (Fluctuating White No. 1)*, 2011, ink and acrylic on *xuan* paper, 88.9 x 96.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chinese Cultural Center, San Francisco.

As a corollary to the *Eroded Black* paintings, Zheng Chongbin has created a series of works that disarm by their brilliant whiteness. It is something of a relief perhaps that the dark vision gives way to a different sequence of works, yet they pose their own challenges. Due to their large scale, works such as *(Untitled) Fluctuating White I* (2011), *Grey and White* (2009), or *Light, Dark, Dry, Wet* (2010) flood the viewer's image field with a brightness that is overwhelming, yielding an intense visual experience that can be akin to trying to see through fog. Rather than constructing images that create illusions of spatial depth as historical ink paintings do, these works conjure realities in which visual certainties remain obscured from view, presenting epistemological questions regarding how we know what we know.

Historically speaking, the work *Light, Dark, Wet, Dry* nods in respect to Mark Rothko's large, luminous forms, granting something of a ghostly apparition of that artist's legacy. Of course, Zheng Chongbin has completely transformed the intentions of this mentor, for where Rothko studied the intensities of colour, Zheng Chongbin creates with black and white. Further, the details wrought on Zheng Chongbin's white forms reveal a multitude of scratching, as though time has scuffed the surface of an obdurate mass that, although oversized, is not impervious to erosion. Ironically, the shapes in

Installation view of the Zheng Chongbin exhibition, White Ink, at the Chinese Cultural Center, San Francisco.

these paintings oscillate in the mind's eye between being soft and luminous, or obdurate stone boulders that at close-range appear chaffed by wind, sleet, and rain. Scuffed with the haphazard markings of nature and time, the images, though grand, suggest a reality of abrasion and neglect. These are not easy works, but rather ink paintings that challenge and that brave rugged, unfamiliar frontiers.

In this sense, Zheng Chongbin's works collectively manifest the allusion of a lost grandeur. While the large scale of these works grants them extraordinary visual power, it is their articulation of the sweeping expanse of time and space that remains memorable in the mind's eye. Such qualities of existence, manifested through the immediacy of gestured expression writ both in positive and negative artistic form, suggesting the passage of time and its neglects, make these works formidable and haunting. Presenting ink paintings that dare to trace the perimeter of the land known as oblivion, Zheng mingles the past and present, granting glimpses of realities that burn brightly with poetry, poignancy, and power.

This is a revised version of an essay for the exhibition catalogue White Ink *published by the Chinese Culture Foundation, San Francisco.*

Tony Godfrey

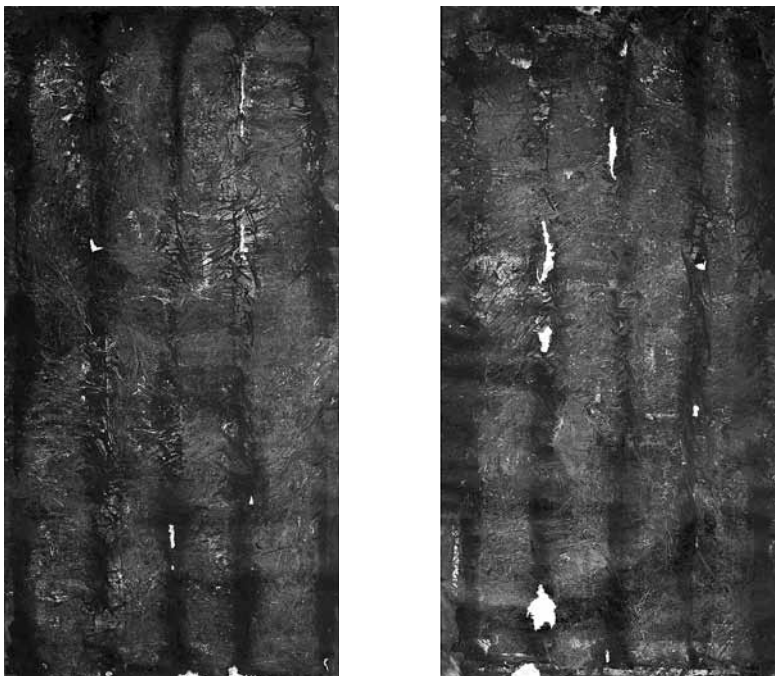
Zheng Chongbin: Ten Metaphors with which to Experience His Paintings

Liang Kai, *The Sixth Patriarch Cutting Bamboo*, twelfth century, ink on paper, 72.7 x 31.8 cm. Collection of Tokyo National Museum.

Three years ago, I moved to Asia from Europe where I had been writing and teaching about art for over thirty years. One of the reasons I moved to Asia was my growing awareness that I did not understand Chinese painting as well as I would like. While visiting an exhibition of Chinese ink painting in Shanghai with artist Zheng Chongbin, I was fascinated and won over by his advocacy for the medium. We stopped in front of Liang Kai's famous twelfth century painting of *The Sixth Patriarch Cutting Bamboo* and discussed the precision of this famous work, how so much is said with so few marks, how the urgency of the line conveys this spiritual moment.

Later, with another Chinese friend, I visited an exhibition of art from the Hermitage in St. Petersburg that was made or bought during the reign of Catherine the Great. What was of most interest to me were the paintings she had herself collected. I enthused about a painting by the seventeenth century Italian artist Guercino, *The Transfiguration of the Magdalene* (1622). Borne aloft by a flock of angels (many represented as children's heads on wings), with one waving the whip she flogged herself with, and another holding up the hair shirt she mortified herself with, the full-bosomed Magdalene, arrayed in gold, still looked strangely fresh and even sexy.

But I failed to convey my enthusiasm to my companion. The subject matter is so historically removed—can one fully understand the content of this painting without some specialist knowledge of Counter Reformation theology? The colours are beautiful, so well balanced, but the technical skill seems so cold and uptight. Not just Chinese, but Caucasians of my friend's younger generation are much closer to the loose, revelatory daring skill of Liang Kai. By comparison, Guercino's work looks too staged. However, one could argue that in order to truly understand the painting of Liang Kai, you would need as much knowledge of twelfth century Chinese monastic Buddhism as you would of Counter Reformation theology during Guercino's time.



Zheng Chongbin, *White Ink on Black No. 1, 2, 3, 4*, 2011, ink and acrylic on *xuan* paper, 244 x 122 cm (each panel). Courtesy of the artist and Chinese Cultural Center, San Francisco.

Some weeks later I communicated by Skype with an old friend, Ian McKeever, an English painter who began work as a conceptual artist with an interest in landscape but has transmogrified into abstract painting. I talked with him about how I saw a similarity between his and Zheng Chongbin's work. "I am not sure," he replied, "but I am instinctively in favour of anyone who crosses cultural boundaries."[1]

I should define my position: I am someone who works in contemporary art but who has an abiding love of, and interest in, Western painting. I am someone who wants to think globally but realizes that to understand particular traditions, first-hand experience is often necessary. But also I am expressing the complicated position in which we all find ourselves when seeking to experience artworks and then attempting to communicate that experience. Traditions matter, histories matter; we make art and we understand art within those traditions, but in a global world we are constantly crossing and mixing such traditions and histories. An artist such as Zheng Chongbin, who is successfully cross-cultural, is, therefore, especially important. But this makes writing about his work oddly difficult. Which language should I use? That of the literati scholars, of modernism, or of the highly theorized discourse found in much contemporary art criticism?

Most of our experience is visual; most of our communication is verbal. This is the paradox that exists when writing or talking about art; not only paradox, but challenge. When one tries to write about painting, language always proves to be inadequate; at best one seems to end up creating a text that runs parallel to the painting or that it is an equivalent to one's experience of the painting. Language is a code, painting is not—or if so only patchily. We cannot read signs in a painting the same way we can with language, attaching (more or less) signifieds to signifiers. Painting is a thing made, and our understanding of it is in experiencing it primarily in a visual way, in the effects of its making, then in analyzing those effects intellectually.

While standing in front of a painting by Zheng Chongbin, *White Ink on Black* (2011) for example, facing the scale, the density of paint, and the complexity of it all, I have a strong visceral response. But how can I put that response into words? And how can I relate it to other paintings that I experience? And which paintings should they be: just Chinese, or from a global remit?

One can only talk about the experience of painting through metaphors. Each metaphor used is like another net thrown into the river; each time, each throw pulls a few fish from the water. It is only after several throws of the net that we get a sense of what sort of fish live in the river. The following are a few of the metaphors I would like to propose in in an attempt to understand Zheng Chongbin's paintings: stormy skies; temple architecture; ink and nothing but ink; a moment suspended in time; as stone, or nature's flow and erosion; skin or body; oil painting; blackness and night; creases and folds; caves. Some of these, you may argue, are not metaphors, but categories.

Stormy Skies

Part of the distance we have from traditional art such as Guercino's is that we have lost the codes he used—of gesture and symbol—and to some extent replaced them with ones based upon a romantic perception of nature. For Guercino, nature was a backdrop that gave a useful compositional diagonal and some suggestion of the desert the Magdalene had hidden in to repent and meditate, but for British artists such as John Constable or J. M. W. Turner, nature was everything.

A wall of turbulent storm clouds building up above the horizon could be how one might describe Zheng Chongbin's *White Ink on Black*, for example. And up to a point that is sufficient because the drama in a stormy sky is between the apparent solidity of the cloud mass—and solidity here is

threatening, engulfing, breath-stifling, looming, and claustrophobic—and the barely concealed light that is an equivalent to the drama of dark and light in his work. Perhaps, above all else, in such a sky we grow sensitive to each patch in the cloud where light shoots through, sending a beam of light to strike the earth or else, as in that "silver lining to the cloud," the sun makes the edges around the cloud brighten and sing.

And in paintings of the sky we enjoy the sensuality of the clouds—their billows and folds are like those of a heavy velvet curtain. It is hard not to read the turbulence of clouds in romantic painting—from Constable to August Strindberg—as not just an external fact, but as an equivalent to some internal sensation, an objective correlative to an emotional state.

Temple Architecture

The insistent architectonics of *White Ink on Black* militate against such a romantic, emotional reading as an all-encompassing one. Consisting of four large sheets of paper arranged as vertical columns, each much taller than a human being, it cannot but remind me of the portico of a Greek temple. Asked whether his paintings were meant for temples or bedrooms (perhaps the two most opposite destinations a painting can have), he laughs, "Temple paintings indeed, not bedroom ones! With the monumental form of my paintings, they need more space; a more sober and solemn spiritual atmosphere."

And when asked whether he had ever been commissioned to do bedroom paintings**,** he says, "Yes, but when they saw my paintings, they clearly wouldn't be any good there, but they liked them so they just bought them. I want my paintings seen within architecture and within [an] installation [format]. I want a marriage between installation and paintings. I want a way to look away from painting's flat surface, I want painting that is connected to the physical space."

When he replied that he would rather his paintings were in a temple than a bedroom, was he being merely flippant? When I look at the severity of a work like *White Ink on Black*, with its panels of vertical columns, it is clear that an equivalence is there. The columns are not just convenient geometry to play against; they have weight, gravitas, and formality. The association of a temple is still a living one, though one might well ask, what do temples mean to a non-believer?

As I write this essay, I am in Bagan, Myanmar, where, spread out on a plain the size of Manhattan, there still stand over 2,200 *paya*, or pagodas—Buddhist temples or *stupas*. It may seem a rather strange place to think of Zheng Chongbin's paintings, but there is a repetition of forms that is like an echo: 2,200 temples, all more or less the same shape, but all subtly different from each other. There is a certainty to them in their progression from square floor plan to circular *stupa* that has something in common with Zheng Chongbin's commitment to the vertical and the rectangle, the column and the window.

The notion of the architectonic we see in his painting is also related to notions of harmony as well as geometry. I suggested to him that "the notion of harmony, which is still implicit in Western modernism today, is about proportion. It is still rooted in the Greek temples. I think the notion of harmony in Chinese art is not quite the same case." Zheng Chongbin's response was, "No, Chinese harmony is not about proportion, but about connection. It is about travelling from one point to another point and coming back in a circular form."

In all the temples of Bagan, the circle is ultimately pre-eminent, standing out against the land and the sky, occasionally, when covered with gold, gleaming like a revelation. The water and the ink flow around the columns, washing and eroding them; the action of the painting is circular.

Ink and Nothing But Ink

Zheng Chongbin's education as an artist was unusually traditional. As he reports:

> I brought my drawings to him [a teacher appointed by his father], and he took me to the Shanghai Museum and showed me the masterpieces of ancient Chinese artists. There I realized that I would have to restart everything from scratch. This first art teacher of mine had graduated from the Chinese ink painting department in Shanghai Art Academy. After one year when I only did drawings, one day he told me to buy four things: ink stick, ink stone, different brushes, and *xuan* paper, Chinese rice paper. I can still [remember] the smell of the ink and paper. I was excited and eager to start Chinese ink painting. But my teacher didn't allow me to use my purchases. It is like in the kung fu films where kids who want to learn kung fu have to start with carrying the water bucket for a year. Really, it is a kind of Chinese methodology in learning.
>
> So my teacher would bring me works that were done by his teachers. I was allowed to look at them, but I wasn't allowed to start copying from them. Instead, I continued to do drawings of still-lifes, of sitting models. The next step was the technical accomplishment. My teacher showed me how lines were drawn in Tang dynasty paintings. He showed me the importance of the concept of lines in Chinese painting. About two years later, he gave me a copy of the *Wudaozi* painting from the Tang dynasty and said, "Copy it. Use brush, start painting." It was how I started: by copying calligraphy and paintings. Once a week, I went to his home and showed him my paintings. He would offer me criticism and also demonstrate how to paint.

Does this explain the work Zheng Chongbin makes today? He pays homage to artists such as Guo Xi, from the Song dynasty, as well as Zhu Da (Ba Da Shan Ren) and Shi Tao, who helped keep the tradition alive. But does he maintain the tradition? Yes, but, as he says, only by challenging it. On the

Zheng Chongbin, *Dissolved Form No. 2*, 2011, ink and acrylic on *xuan* paper, 420.3 x 205.7 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chinese Cultural Center, San Francisco.

other hand, he laments how the generation of older artists from the 1950s and '60s often had to maladroitly blend their style with Socialist Realism.[2]

What he seeks is not revivalism but something deep within the practice of ink painting that is compatible with the practice of Western abstract painting. "The core value of ink painting," he emphasizes, "is the rhythm. It is very important. You see the movement in the painting, and that gives you a different sense of energy."

Again and again he emphasizes the importance of his medium, its physical imperatives: "There is no meaning in my work. In other words, my work only has the material characteristic of its own, by being the narrative as a code of physical evidence. As a result, my work cannot be categorized. It is the style of no style."[3]

His attitude, or position, toward the long tradition of ink painting is perhaps not so different from that of American or English abstract painters who would go to the Metropolitan Museum, New York, or the National Gallery, London, every week to look at Titian or Constable but never themselves paint a figure or a tree.

As a Moment Suspended in Time

The painting by Liang Kai that I looked at with Zheng Chongbin is explicitly about the moment of enlightenment, the moment of revelation. This is the moment when God or the divine is revealed. But the way it is painted, with so few but such sure strokes, makes it an equivalent to this moment when all suddenly becomes clear.

In Zheng Chongbin's paintings the white spots offer such an immediacy. The sense of things frozen or fixed, of flows of liquid suddenly arrested, is similar. The form or giant ideograph in *Dissolved Form No. 2* (2011) hovers in its space like an angel or an avatar. The vigorous gestures that made it are

frozen forever; that which once flowed is now still. It is as if a moment in time has been frozen.

As Stone, or Nature's Flow and Erosion

Zheng Chongbin's monolithic forms seem to carry the weight of stone but never its colour. Their markings suggest not granite or limestone but something not yet petrified, something still capable of flow, or at least the marks made recently by some sort of activity: marks on a rock face battered by waves.

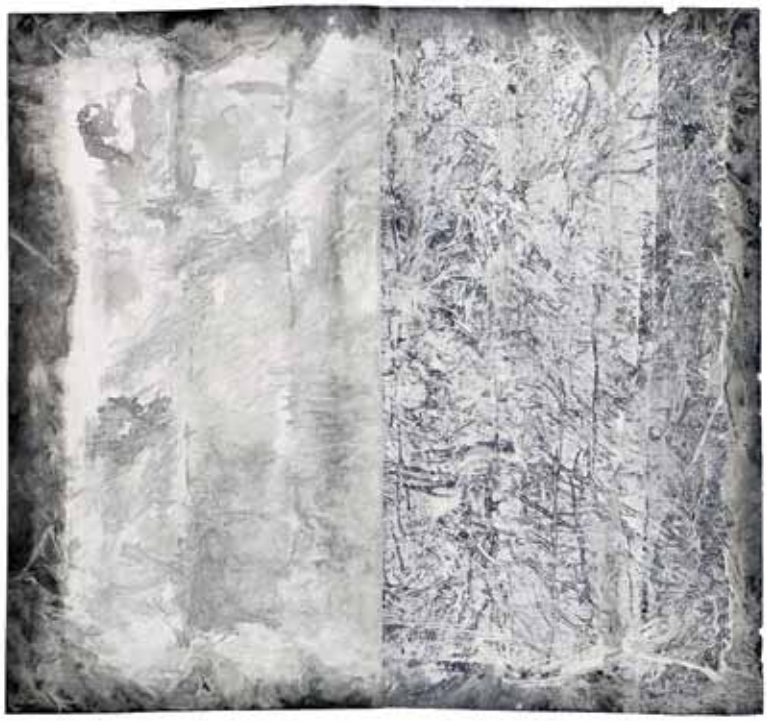
Ink flows. It floods the paper, sinks in or slides across the saturated surface. Many Western artists influenced by conceptual art have put paper out in an open field or within a forest and let nature take its toll—rain, wind, rats, and insects scraping, staining, and scratching them—and then retrieved them to work further on these new marks.[4] When he attempted this, it did not work:

> I tried to put the work outside on a rainy day. But paper [dissolves] or [breaks down] into [pulp] from heavy rain. I guess my notion of trashing the painting got a bit overdone. I wanted to be absent from the whole art-making process. But I still have to play the intermediate role between the physical object/ink, wash, paper, and nature. . . . to manage its proposed form without any fake and attempted intrusion from myself.

Zheng Chongbin talks of feeling how he is outside the painting when he is making it. The flow of the ink, paint, and water happens, it seems, of its own volition: one material seeping through another, granules washed up and left by the miniature deltas of liquid. This is what happens when different liquids converge and meet—like freshwater and seawater, mud-carrying water churning into clear water. Talking of how he looks at those light-giving spots of white in the flood of black ink, he recalls those moments when one comes to the surface to breathe when swimming underwater and he expounds on that time when the flows have stopped and he must assess what, and if, anything further must be done:

> When I am done with my painting, I put it on the wall. I look at it and decide if the spots are intuitive. Sometimes, it is by chance, sometimes I have predicted it. Some spots are used technically to stop the ink flow. So you want to make sure they are still there the next morning when you come back to the studio. Before I go to the mounting shop, I need to recheck. If the spot is a broken hole I can put another layer of paper to make the hole disappear. But in most of cases I feel that I want to keep it in the original state. So it is intuitive, but at the same time very deliberate.

We must always recall, seduced as we are by the richness of the surface of his paintings, the fine detail of these dried up deltas, that he emphasizes depth, not surface.



Zheng Chongbin, *Two Sides No. 2*, 2011, ink and acrylic on *xuan* paper, 152.4 x 165.1 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chinese Cultural Center, San Francisco.

In Myanmar, at the *payas*, they pour water on statues at the eight cardinal points that represent the eight days of the week (Wednesday counts as two days). Every temple has, it seems, a water ceremony—baptism, washing one's hands at the entrance to the temple, sprinkling water on the congregation. Water clears and purifies; water finds channels through the dust. A Korean friend gives me a water pourer: when puzzled, she suggests, pour water from it on paper and watch the way it flows and spreads; it may help you decide what to do. Our fascination in spreading puddles or in how the incoming tide invades and inveigles itself onto the beach is perhaps a deep-seated belief that somehow we are being told something of consequence.

Skin or Body

In our conversations, I have asked whether one should see the surface of the paintings as an equivalent to human skin. Zheng Chongbin's response was that there was "A strong body association in my paintings. I have always been interested in biomorphic forms. For me the biomorphic form involves my coordination and understanding of this medium. And the rhythms of my coordination with this medium are about my own coordination and rhythms." When I suggested that therefore the biomorphic form was important, but the metaphor of the paper as skin was not, he responded that,

> The skin is the part of my sensibility . . . it is closely connected to the images I have . . . maybe we can talk about the biomorphic experience, the reason why I associated the body with my images. My sister had Down's Syndrome, and she was paranoid when she was five years old. My mother had to take care of her all the time. So I spent my childhood with a family member who was physically disabled. But my sister was incredible. Despite her low intelligence, she was a very sensitive person,

> very understanding, and her humour sometimes dramatically switched from that of a five-year-old to an adult drastically. What amazed me most was that she was so coordinated that sometimes she could climb up to a high ceiling without using any support. I looked at how she moved and felt that she had such a powerful impact on me. Her deformed body interested me a lot, and I found it beautiful and powerful . . . in the same way as the world of Francis Bacon attracted me.

Again, the artist wants to emphasize movement and depth rather than surface. We must pull our eyes away from the beautiful, mottled surface of the right hand side of *Two Sides No. 2* (2011), rather than indulging in sensual pleasure. We may think of these marks to be like those that lichen or snails leave on tree bark, but depth is the key. I think of the tracery of ferns in a forest. Overlaid against the vertical columns, somewhat understated compared to *White Ink on Black*, there is layer on layer; an above and a below, a nearer and a further away. This is replicated in the way we position ourselves when looking at the paintings—standing back a few metres to get their overall feel or gestalt and then moving close up to see the myriad details.

Oil Painting

There is an intense engagement in Zheng Chongbin's work with the tradition of Western oil painting. This is rarely, if ever, evident to the eye. He says,

> In the early 1980s, when China began to open up to the world, different kinds of Western art in the form of books and magazines stormed in to China all at once . . . We were all exposed to a complete new understanding of art—ways of looking at art and creating differently. I was deeply impressed by the works of Renaissance artists I saw in books on Western art history, and also I liked the Impressionist painters' works. Then I saw some German Expressionist works and was absorbed by how the basic elements of colour and form were reconstructed. It was an eye opener.

When I ask if he was influenced by specific artists, such as Mark Rothko or Robert Ryman, he defers:

> In my mind I don't feel I was influenced by Rothko or Ryman. The monolithic forms come from the material I used—ink and paper. I would say the style and art form of my works are very much Western and Chinese art combined. These mixtures bring different perspectives, different dimensions.

But he talks with enthusiasm of Caravaggio and Agnes Martin, as unlikely as that pairing may seem. The bars, stripes, and columns in Zheng Chongbin's paintings may seem a little like Martin's. A painting such as *White Ink A* (2011), with its vertical stripes, reflects on a tradition of stripe painting that encompasses such diverse figures as Frank Stella, Ellsworth Kelly, and

Robert Irwin. That is to say, there is a body of reference and association that someone who knows that work brings to his or her experience of *White Ink A*. It adds resonance.

Blackness and Night

Sometimes, cultural differences are truly incompatible: in the West, black is the colour for funerals; in China, it is white. But night is always black—wherever we go—its blackness rescinding all cultural differences.

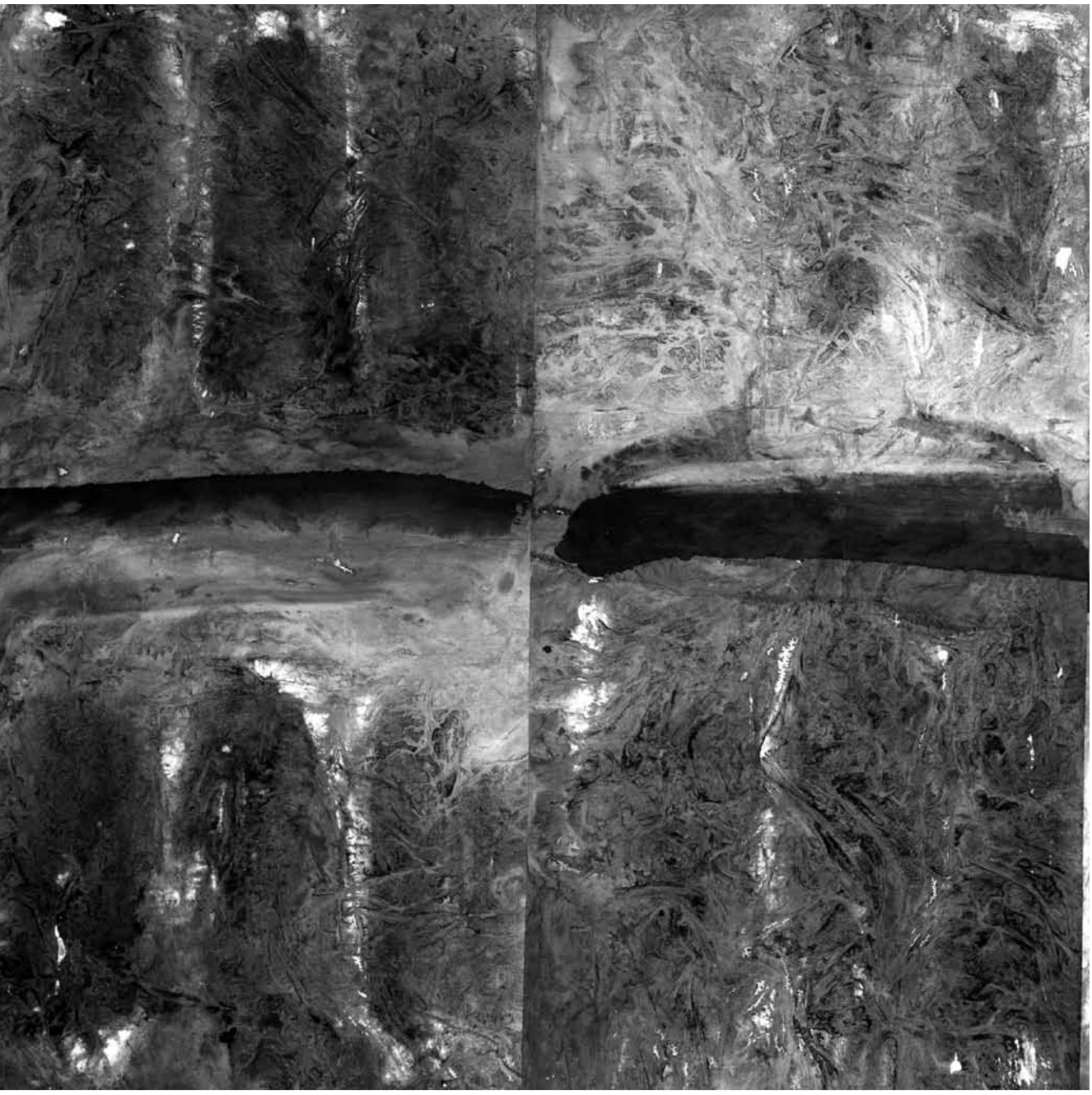
In Western painting perhaps we most associate blackness with Spanish painters such as Zurbarán, Velázquez, or Goya, and French artists such as Eduard Manet who sought to emulate that extreme blackness and that range of blacks. This search for black that is so sombre and serious has been a sub-current of painting since Manet; think of Kazimir Malevich and Ad Reinhardt. It is associated with definitiveness and with closure but is also strangely sensual and sumptuous. It is this sumptuousness of black that Zheng Chongbin evokes in such paintings as *White Ink on Black Ink*, a density of blackness that is not common in Chinese art. It simultaneously carries body, bulk, weight, and something that—like nightfall—absorbs us.

Creases and Folds

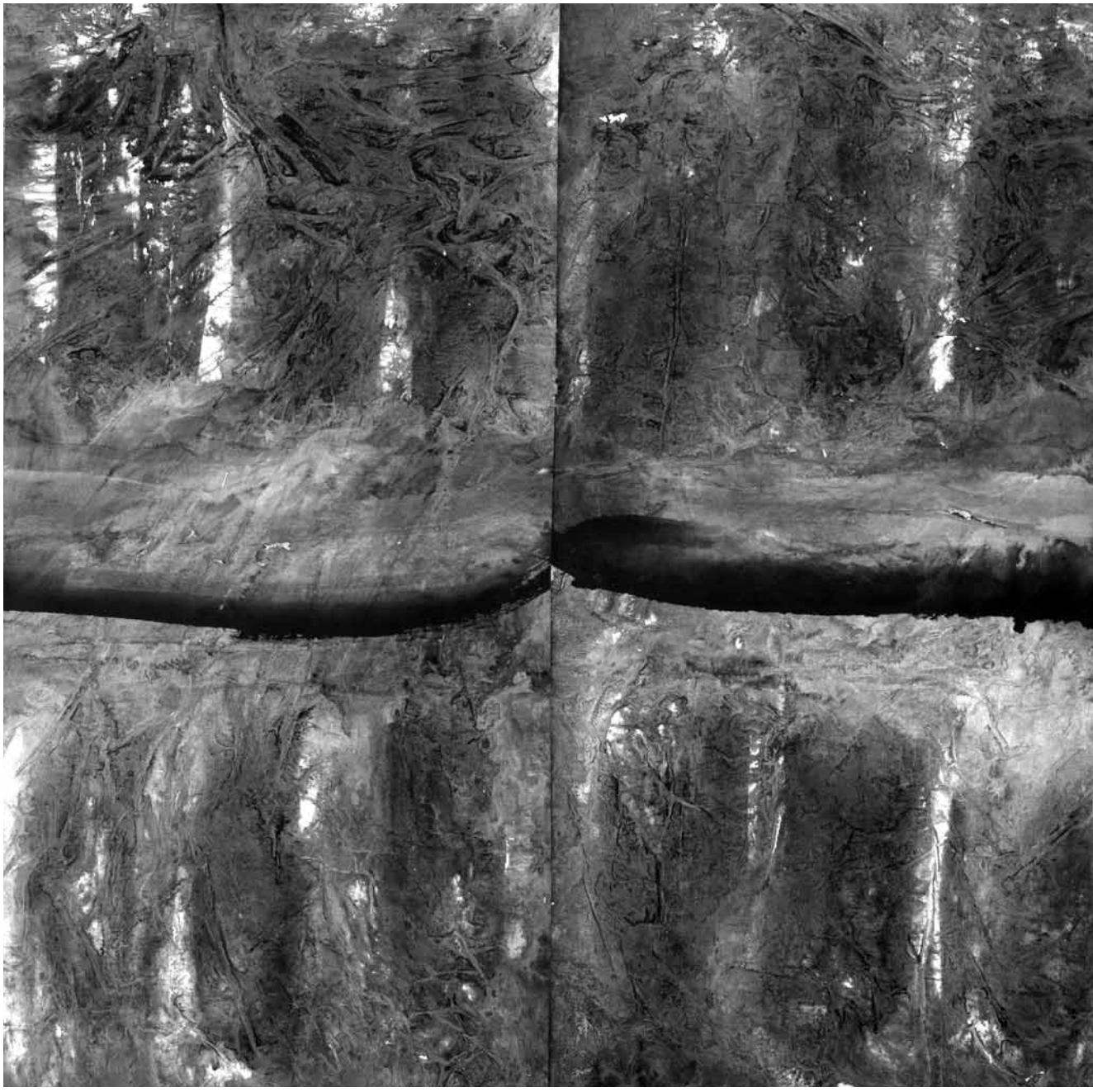
As with so many good painters, Zheng Chongbin's work is about an intense conversation between geometry and the intuitive, between structure and gesture, accident and the purposeful.[5] But also it is about complex, convoluted edges, fissures, and creases—folds. In Gilles Deleuze's rereading of the baroque, he finds that it is an art that twists and folds, its multiple exterior surfaces echoing the intuitive experience of the subject in this ultra-dynamic world of the twenty-first century, folding the subject itself in interaction with the flux. Deleuze uses the metaphor of the rhizome to explain this world—rhizomes being those plants that grow not from seeds but from elements of themselves, constantly spreading across the ground and re-rooting themselves. In a world where the hierarchy descending from God or divine harmony has disappeared, such a network with its near infinite number of routes is another way of explaining how both the world and the human neural system works.[6]

Deleuze writes of "the pleats of matter, and the folds in the soul." As art historian Mieke Bal and others have pointed out, this parallels the obsession with complex folds in the drapery of baroque painting or in the mise-en-scene of Caravaggio's work.[7] The space of Zheng Chongbin's paintings is similarly complex and is derived to a great extent from an equivalent modulation of edges, fissures, and rivulets. *Broken Line* (2011) is almost a textbook manifestation of how a line or gesture produces edges, shape, and space. A painting such as *Dissolved Form No. 2* (2011) does so even more clearly. This painting is more typical of his earlier works,[8] with their emphasis on forms closer to calligraphy or the ideograph. But his recent paintings, with their emphasis on architectonic horizontals and verticals, have this complexity too. The columns or bars do not just sit there; modulated by gesture and flow, they do not just hover peacefully but pull back and forth, fade and grow strong, wobble and shift. They create a space that is dynamic and energized.

Zheng Chongbin, *White Ink A*, 2011, ink and acrylic on *xuan* paper, 193 x 177.8 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chinese Cultural Center, San Francisco.



Zheng Chongbin, *Broken Line,* 2011, ink and acrylic on *xuan* paper, 279.4 x 138.4 cm (each panel). Courtesy of the artist and Chinese Cultural Center, San Francisco.



The Cave

What is this space? The cave that Plato wrote of? Or the depths of night? Or some other, more metaphysical, mental space? Zheng Chongbin states:

> I don't think much about either texture or surface; but space I think a lot. Space is *the* most important thing in my work. I pay the least attention to surface. If the surface gets in my way, I can reduce it. But depth is very important. The methodology of a good work needs space and depth, which is so important in Western art works. I think space gives me another perspective for looking at the world, and it readjusts my view to the world. Space and perspective are extremely important psychologically to me, too.

Bruce Chatwin speculates in his book *The Songlines* "that deep in our racial subconscious there is a shared memory of being in caves huddled together, silent, comfortable in our mother's arms but fearful of prowling sabre toothed tigers. One can think of those caves we make as children with our bedclothes to hide in—a space or den in which we feel cosseted, comforted and protected."[9]

The brain is a small space several inches across within which electric messages spark around. Space is inside us and as such can seem enormous, literally fathomless, space that can expand, it seems, outwards indefinitely. We can read the space that Zheng Chongbin's paintings create as either internal or outside of us—perhaps best of all as both. External spaces that do not just echo but are also inscapes—landscapes of a state of mind.

This is a revised version of an essay originally published in the exhibition catalogue for Zheng Chongbin's exhibition INKinquiry *at Ooi Botos Gallery, Hong Kong, May 14 to June 4, 2011.*

Notes

1 Unless otherwise stated, all quotations are from an interview between Zheng Chongbin, Tony Godfrey, and Wang Kaimei, Shanghai, September 2010. Thanks also are due to Wang Kaimei for editing that interview.

2 "Recently I saw a retrospective of an old artist. He is now in his eighties, and he has the most wonderful approach to the literati style of traditional techniques. But to combine them with the socialist realistic style simply demolished the whole idea of the traditional literati painting. I mean, this artist has spent his whole life trying to balance these two styles, and eventually just hit a dead end. I feel really sad about it."

3 From an interview conducted for Haines Gallery, San Francisco, 2011.

4 E-mail to the author from Zheng Chongbin, April 2011. In England, Ian McKeever and Sian Bowen are two examples of artists who have worked this way. Arguably the progenitor is Marcel Duchamp, with his dust breeding: the photograph of the *Large Glass* left to collect dust.

5 I know these may not seem precise opposites, but against geometry we read the irregular hand-drawn line as intuitive; against structure we read the gesture as human.

6 See especially Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateau: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), and Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).

7 See Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), especially chapter 1, 27–44.

8 Deleuze, *The Fold*, 3.

9 Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines*, (London: Franklin Press, 1986), 259.

Architectonic Ink: Zheng Chongbin in Conversation with Lisa Claypool

Zheng Chongbin, *Stained No. 2 (Moji)*, 2009, ink and acrylic on *xuan* paper, 144 x 560 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

In the process of painting *Stained No. 2* (2009), more literally "ink traces" in Chinese (*moji*), Zheng Chongbin writhes across a mural-sized eighteen foot length of mulberry paper, in which the shallowness of ink is built up through layers of brushwork, opaque whites, and the imprint of the bricks in the paper upon which it had lain while the artist painted. Slashing brush and pooling ink "vibrates, clenches, or cracks open because it is the bearer of glimpsed forces," to borrow the words of Gilles Deleuze.[1] Water, tissue wrinkles, the deep colouristic black of the ink, the heaviness of a thick acrylic, and a wet smear of brown stain, create organic shapes as well as an architectonic space for contemplation and introspection; they compellingly draw the viewer in. The picture is something so fluid—not framed but "deframed"—that it poses a conundrum: how to locate its space? And what are the stakes of entering into the space of an ink painting?

A ready answer is provided, somewhat surprisingly, by the Chinese government. Ink painting had a peculiar presence, for instance, at the 2010 Shanghai World Expo. The slogan of the Expo was, "Better City, Better Life," in English, or, in Chinese, "The City makes your life even more perfect!" (*chengshi rang shenghuo geng meihao*). At the Expo grounds ink painting in state propaganda was most typically presented in video, where montage transformed ink paintings into film sequences. A typical sequence: first mountains and streams appear on the video screen, black ink against white ground. As the brush starts to paint structures not from natural life but from the city—skyscrapers, telephone wires, and smoke stacks—one might be reminded of Socialist-era woodcuts that expressed the energy and might of the city. Unlike those idealized static views of the city, however, in these paintings there is a visual progression as the ground becomes darker with pooled water and ink, and the images start to look like a polluted environment. Out of the blackness a dim photograph of the city—often night scenes in colour, brightened with sparks of neon light—begins to

emerge, solidify, and supplant the ink painting as the photograph morphs into video. In digital posters mounted in the Metro at People's Square, this process might end with the message "love nature" (*ai wo shanshui*), an appeal to environmentalism. At the Expo grounds, the process appeared more than once in the video shown at the National Pavilion, where quotations from the Confucian *Analects* about a harmonious society are interspersed.

Ink painting poster at Expo 2010, Shanghai. Photo: Lisa Claypool.

The title of that video is *Harmonious China* (*hexie zhongguo*). Since 2005 the Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao leadership of the Communist Party has pursued a political-economic policy to create and maintain a "harmonious society" within the framework of "Socialism with Chinese characteristics." But the meaning of "harmony," unsurprisingly, has become ambiguous. On The *China Beat* Blog, cultural historian Geremie Barmé observes that "'to harmonize' has become a common verb in colloquial Chinese meaning 'to censor,' 'elide,' or 'expunge.'"[2] If "to harmonize" possesses negative connotations, it also, critically for the state's goals for the World Expo, points towards a kind of urbanization that is still arguably Chinese despite the apparent transformation of Chinese political authority by the global machine of commerce. Watching the drops of ink coalesce and grow into a city below a phrase from the ninth book of the *Analects*—"The Master, while at the river, said, 'What has passed, has passed like this . . . day into night, not pausing'"—thus makes ideological sense.

What makes this state-mandated view of the city especially seductive is that it is so smart. Propaganda gains strength because it is endlessly repeatable and repeated. Here, the formulaic quality of propaganda for the Expo evaporated into the creative act of picking up the brush. This is propaganda that doesn't look like propaganda. The stakes in this new application and manipulation of old forms of art are high: the visibility of the city, and, more generally, the definitions of what matters to China as its cities grow so rapidly that the nation and the city are beginning to merge.

It is within this peculiar context—one in which what happens to ink painting newly matters in the political, social, and visual arena—that Zheng Chongbin and I sat down to talk about his work. Straight off, even before I had posed my first question, Zheng Chongbin passionately launched into a defense of brush and ink as a contemporary art form and practice.

Zheng Chongbin: In terms of art forms, for me it is always important to put ink painting within the context of contemporary art, within the context of language and material, which is not necessarily limited to Chinese art.

Lisa Claypool: What does it mean to say "contemporary art that is Chinese?"

Zheng Chongbin: Contemporary Chinese art typically asks the viewer to see the subject as social commentary. It's mostly political in content. Ink painting in contrast tends to be marginalized because it is such a unique art form, with its own history. But ink painting should be looked at only as the material—the media that artists use—within a much broader context.

Lisa Claypool: It seems that what you're telling me right now is that when people identify, even essentialize, contemporary Chinese art, they turn to Cultural Revolution iconography and Socialist Realist oil painting, and look for ways it has been appropriated or reinvented by artists now. What you're doing, strangely, doesn't count. Or maybe ink painting is simply shorthand for something that belongs to a different era and historical imagination.

Zheng Chongbin: Of course, an artist's identity is generated from the past; the past is always connected to everyday life. But contemporary Chinese art is constantly being promoted on the world stage and large ink paintings are almost never part of that. In major museums you rarely see large ink paintings. So in China there is a huge debate going on—I'm talking about the artists who live in China, who deal with ink media, who feel left out. The 2004 Chengdu Biennial was the first exhibition where a curator brought an outside point of view: forget about debating about whether ink painting ought to be based on tradition or should be considered only within the context of tradition, and move forward. Ink painting should be expanded more broadly in terms of media.

When I was in school, my teacher once said to me that you've lost your tradition—your duty is to add to your tradition so that you can hold on to it, and that should be your achievement. And there's always an argument between the older and younger teachers. Should we forget about tradition? Even saying that is just a verbal game—we cannot forget about it. It's just that we want to challenge what we have seen already, and what feels limited.

Lisa Claypool: Can you talk more about that notion of tradition within your educational experience: that you add to it, or you forget about it while adding to it. I'd like to explore the idea of forgetting as part of the process of learning. How did you learn to paint with ink?

Zheng Chongbin: When I was a young student in the 1970s, I ended up on the streets because of the Cultural Revolution. I was doing things I maybe should not have been doing. I was interested in drawing, but I wasn't passionate about it. My father forced me to do one drawing a day as a way of controlling me. If I didn't, I would be in big trouble by evening. And as I was doing this, I began to get some encouragement from others. So I started to put my pictures up on the wall and started thinking of myself as a painter.

There was a group of us kids, all about the same age, painting together. When we were around the age of 15 or 16, our parents started to look for teachers for us—painters who used to work in the factories, you know, designing mugs, making propaganda paintings. And the teachers started to teach life drawing in the Russian style or sometimes introduced the books that they had studied—Michelangelo's paintings, for instance. I also sat in on Chen Jialing's classes in the Shanghai Art School (Shanghai meishu xuexiao).

In 1978 I graduated from high school. I failed the entrance exams the first time, so I took a year off and did studies of plaster heads. Chen Jialing sent me to study Wang Xizhi (303–361), the classic calligrapher, for quality of line, for gesture, and also the painter Lu Yanshao (1909–93), whom he considered the best of his contemporaries. Their generation was looking more at decorative effect in the colour field. Then I took the entrance exams again, and came in first for the Shanghai Art Academy and was accepted at the China Academy of Art (Zhongguo meishu xueyuan) in Hangzhou, where I chose to study.

In class, I remember being fascinated by the paper, holding it, smelling it. The teacher wouldn't let me use it. He told me "Right now you're not ready to use it because I am teaching you drawing (*suxie*), and once you get the idea of line, then you start getting familiar with this particular material. When you buy three different kinds of brushes and the grindstone—the basic elements—set for this kind of work, only then you can use the paper." But I think it was so beneficial in a material sense. Because you get an understanding of how you absorb and accept lessons in traditional work, and also learn how you develop an ability to draw things. Then you get an idea of what Chinese drawing is versus other kinds of drawing.

One thing that was truly wonderful was that in class we could study real Chinese paintings. It was like military life—every morning we would wake up around 6:00 a.m. to study Tang poems, exercise for half an hour, and then come back to have breakfast. Then we'd go back to class and spend the entire morning studying Chinese paintings. Afterwards came lunch, a nap, with art history or literature after that, and then we'd go to the library, have dinner, take a walk by the lake; then at night calligraphy class or more work in the library.

We'd have access to paintings by the "Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou," genuine Ming and Qing paintings in the display cases in one of the galleries. Lu Yanshao or Ye Qianyu (1907–95)—very strong painters in these traditions—would come to do demonstrations in class.

So our education emphasized the traditional in every way. But in the first two years of school already I felt that ink painting on paper was facing a dilemma—for instance, we used the aluminum from windows to frame our work, and our teachers thought, "this is really new." The content itself had nothing to do with it. Just changing the format for display—that gave it a sense of contemporaneousness. But that was as far as they would go. My generation in school—the first to encounter Western art—was thinking of texture, media, and of how modern artists painted figures, like Picasso and Dali. So we were simply taking on that form and trying to experiment.

At the time I started to paint with acrylic, too, diluting the ink with it to give it opacity. But that is very formal thinking. My approach was about form and shape in the beginning and also about the materiality of the media, and from that point I evolved. In a few years I wanted to expand the language of ink painting.

But actually I don't think that there is a huge difference in what I am doing now. I need to feel a physicality in the work. I need to build the bodies on the paper so that the body becomes its own form.

Lisa Claypool: Can you talk about the relationship of ink painting as language to building up a body on paper so that it becomes its own form? Language on the one hand is abstract; bodies, especially in your work, are so messy and physical.

Zheng Chongbin: Building up the forms within a structure like language? I was thinking at the time about structure, looking at the architectural structures of Chinese temples. And I wanted to import a very forceful structure into the work to help me deal with pattern and *qi* energy in the traditional sense (as a flow of cosmic energy) in a new way. Buddhist temples have a very rigid line. But the details are organic. And I thought it was interesting to combine that rigidity and organic form to build up the surface and depth in my own paintings.

Lisa Claypool: You started out by talking about creating your own language with brush and ink, and of course with ink painting there's a close relationship to writing through another art of the brush—calligraphy—and then there is a pictorial formula that you see in painting manuals, for instance, that has its own internal grammar of form. Propaganda also possesses its own language—that formulaic figuration of Socialist Realism. It has to look to a certain way. But what is interesting to me is that when I look at your painting, I don't think of language at all. Your paintings ask for the viewer to sink into a kind of virtual space created by the lines and planes of ink, for an emotional response, not to be read or deciphered as though they are visual codes.

Zheng Chongbin: What I meant by language is a kind of visual structure. It's the elements used to build form, and for me it's a way to take ink painting out of two dimensionality, to build up the pictorial space instead of to reduce or strip down representation to a kind of pure form.

In a contemporary art sense, in Chinese ink painting there is a freedom from formula, but only in certain ways. In my paintings there are submerged body shapes that suck you in; they give the layers of ink an immediacy, right there in front of you. Through this almost invisible figuration I wanted to complicate and work beyond traditional paintings that are closer to calligraphy.

Also, one of the things my teacher Lu Yanshao would say was: don't copy with your brush; use your fingers. So when I was a student, I would copy paintings I'd see on display in the art galleries. And I would go through many paintings a hundred times and try to figure out how the painter did it. And when I went back to the studio, I would try to replicate that. But I couldn't see the work, so it was based on body memory. I would make a close copy with some residue of my own input. No matter how you formulate a line, it's very personal; it's about how you connect your gestures. There's a playfulness. It's how form becomes part of your understanding of how to play with the material.

Lisa Claypool: You graduated in 1984. What did you do after that?

Zheng Chongbin: I stayed at the Academy and taught for four years. We read Nietzsche and Kant, and studied excerpts and pulled stimulating ideas out of it. There was a whole energy. Also, I mentioned temples earlier, and I would take students to the Tianmushan area temples in Zhejiang province. I would let them go draw, and I would stay in the temple and use the facility. It was so easy; they'd let you stay for three weeks. I would bring a stack of paper and work on the huge, very smooth floor, and live the way a Buddhist lives.

Lisa Claypool: So this was around 1985-87. It sounds as though your practice started to shift around that time, that you started to produce paintings that were monumental in size. Can you say more about that?

Zheng Chongbin: I was painting on paper surfaces that were about eight to ten feet tall to engage with the space of the temple. I considered the work an installation. And I found I needed a new brush. I wanted a bold and direct rawness. I chose to start using a mounting brush (*paibi*), a wide brush in multiple sizes. It changed my perception of how to use the brush.

As I just mentioned, one reason I first incorporated body forms and evolved into the full body representations, and then made a bird series, was because of the Buddhist temples—when you look inside Buddhist temples you see all those icons, and I wanted to put them into the work.

But also, my sister has Downs syndrome, and her legs are paralyzed. And she would always use her hands to get around. We lived in a loft filled with ladders. Everybody would sleep in the loft. So using just two hands she could pull herself up. I was always amazed how she could flip her body. It was deformed. And I wanted to put that distorted bodily presence in my work.

But I was moving away from realism. I am into form that is much more enigmatic. The other parts of those layered organic shapes are produced from deep physical learning—your body just learns a kind of stroke and produces it.

Lisa Claypool: Yes, even if I tried to, I wouldn't be able to replicate your brushstroke.

Zheng Chongbin: Just like any other abstract painting—that first movement has so much emotional charge, it can't be replicated.

Lisa Claypool: It's hard even to see the performance—where you're putting the brush down and where you're picking it up.

Zheng Chongbin: I use the ink vocabulary I learned from those Ming and Qing dynasty paintings, but I also fold and break up the stroke. If you look at a flower painting, you can see just how the painter moved the brush, but not in my work. In terms of Abstract Expressionism what the artists do is that they are looking at the work as a whole, to capture the sense of movement, a whole sense of the playfulness. I think I do naturally understand how that movement and rhythm of the ink (*moyun*) should be put in place, but I actually still try to make some forms. Again, the ink has a purity, as part of the language of the ink, but I also wanted to show form, a sense of the emotion, and a sense of the facial expression.

In the late 1980s I moved to San Francisco, to study at the Art Institute. I was looking at the work of Cy Twombly and Franz Kline. The blot series I painted in the nineties became even less suggestive in terms of obvious forms. The earlier work is more about control; this is about loss of control. And so from about 1997 to 2002 I did a lot of this work.

Lisa Claypool: What do you think about Shitao's (1642-1707) *10,000 Ugly Ink Blots* (*Wandian emo*)?

Zheng Chongbin: My series of ink blot paintings was generated from it. Why dots? Dots are the anchor point. A dot is the point that balances the work. It's the punctuation in a code. Shi Tao amplified the abstraction of the dot. In my own work, on the lines, where they crossed, I added dots. And then I started to focus purely on the dots, fields of dots, but they'd overlap, bleed into each other, escape my control, and I used some ceramic sealers so that when they dried they still seemed wet. And I wanted to create more layers and depth. Actually, during those years I did a lot of object making and installation work.

Lisa Claypool: Because of that spatial depth in your painting, there is a kind of logical progression to making three-dimensional installations.

Zheng Chongbin: My paintings were always deeply connected to three-dimensional space. But when I first arrived in the Bay Area, I felt that what I did in China was over. I was dropped into a whole new way of thinking—

Zheng Chongbin, *Suitcases,* 1993, found objects, photographs, video. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

Opposite page: Zheng Chongbin, *Another State of Man, No. 8,* 1988, ink and acrylic on *xuan* paper, 243.8 x 66 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

students at the Art Institute were discussing art as public or as conceptual. I paused. I didn't know if I could continue to paint. So for the M.F.A. graduation show I created installations; there was one installation of suitcases, beat up, battered, and opened up as if they were a trace of human gesture. I collected magazine headshots of celebrities, politicians, the pope, and all these photos I reprinted in black and white. They all captured a universal body language—a hand covering the face—that is a gesture of secrecy and suggests a hidden personal history. Each reshot photograph was placed into an open suitcase; about thirty were scattered throughout the gallery space. You would walk through them. I just wanted to understand how material works and how the idea is first in terms of working.

Lisa Claypool: But that led you into new realizations about your painting practice, didn't it? Because you've got all of the same elements that make your painting so unique: a body moving into space, first of all—the body of the visitor. And a particular kind of engagement—you've been talking a lot about creating space for the viewer to be tended to by the art object itself. And then there's figuration—the black-and-white photos—and distortion, if you think about the transformation from magazine photo through your camera lens to the photos that were placed inside the suitcases, or about the curious way people change their bodies as they wend their way through the installation. In doing so, they create paths or lines of movement, as though each suitcase were an embodied dot in the space of your installation. There's a deep connection to your painting.

Zheng Chongbin: Absolutely. I was trying to transfer meaning to objects—to create an indeterminate space, where there is not transformation of one thing into the next, but something is passed from one object to the next.

Lisa Claypool: You've talked about the purity of ink. Ink washes—water moving over the surface of the paper—give paper a kind of clean transparency. But in your case the paper has been on the studio floor, the grit on the floor has become embedded in it. Layers of dirt adhere to paper because of the pooling of the water.

Zheng Chongbin: It's very complex. I think that the purity of ink is more about the layer of the poetic. It's a core value. To trash the paper brings out its material quality.

I am also always interested in the seam that is created by putting two pieces of paper together—in substructures beneath the painting's composition. I lay pieces of paper together and paint; when I mount it I shift them to overlap. In fact I should go back to explain that process. The paper shifting doesn't come after I have painted; it starts at the beginning. I like to look at the shifted space before I put any ink on the paper; I am looking at the hidden structure of two geometries. I am in the situation of working on the two different surfaces and dimensions. My work often has the nuance of a shifted optical twist.

Lisa Claypool: Have you continued to make installations?

Zheng Chongbin, *Ink Painting Now (Shuimo dangxia)*, 2009, video, installation view at Shanghai Duolun Museum. Courtesy of the artist.

Zheng Chongbin: Yes. In a video and series of paintings I did for a show at the Duolun Museum [in Shanghai] last year, I focused on how to mentally prepare to do the work, and how you connect to the work. A screen was placed over the rotunda area. You could view the screen from each floor at a different angle. It telescopes through the museum. On it looped a continuous video image of a hand holding the ink stick and grinding it on the ink stone; this ritual is an important procedure before starting to paint. It is a meditative process that helps to unify mind and body. The form of the preparation then becomes the content of art making.

For another project at the Marina Bay Sands Hotel, in Singapore, I made a site-specific ceramic sculpture called *The Rising Forest*. It is composed of eighty-three massive glazed stoneware vessels; each vessel weighs about 1,200 kilograms and measures three metres in height. They're so tall that each vessel holds a tree, creating a kind of "lifted forest" across the interior and exterior areas of the hotel atrium. I had to build a customized kiln the size of a small building to fire them. In my terms, these objects create an energy field spanning an interactive space between the inner and outer atriums.

Zheng Chongbin, *Rising Forest*, 2008–10, site-specific sculpture at Marina Bay Sands Hotel, Singapore. Courtesy of the artist.

Lisa Claypool: Looking at this sculpture, for me, brings to mind the *Ink Blot* series—lines in the form of tree branches and leaves emerging from rounded vessels, some of which are rich velvety matte blacks, others mottled and luminescent. And the trees, also, slip in and out of control like the inky blots—they're potted, after all, and placed in regulated lines, but they can die or lose their leaves, grow scraggly, turn into shadows as the light dims at night; there's a kind of co-creation at play.

Zheng Chongbin: I would call it the fabrication of a "situation"; indoors or outdoors, in an institutional space or gallery, a situation shifts the meaning of the visual experience. Sometimes artwork is less engaged with the space. It's like it's packed or contained by curatorial decisions into the gallery space. The viewer does not become aware of the surrounding environment. But an artist can use the environment to unpack the artwork through the materiality of the artwork itself.

When I painted *Zone 2* (2010), for instance, I painted strokes in a less coherent way; the strokes are floating, expanded, singled out. Because the strokes are less formulaic and interlocking and more segmental, the notion of shifted space is more prioritized, more immediate. The textures, solid and void, can be viewed differently. The dimension is elastic. It expands and contracts around the viewer.

Lisa Claypool: One of your paintings was featured in 2010 in the Shanghai: Art of the City exhibition at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. We've been talking about the nature of space, and questioning and exploring its mediation between objects and people. "Situation," of course, brings to mind the 1960s Situationists' explorations of psychogeography through a kind of unrestricted wandering into the landscape. In this case, it might refer to a cityscape, wandering through the city. So I wonder if *Dimension of Ink No. 1* (2008) relates to the city of Shanghai through the space it creates?

Zheng Chongbin: Well, first, the curator asked me to participate in the "Shanghai" show because I am Shanghainese. Since I grew up in Shanghai,

Zheng Chongbin, *Blot No. 1*, 2000, ink and acrylic on *xuan* paper, 345.4 x 177.8 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

I have always been influenced by different cultures, directly or indirectly. I learned the art of ink painting in this more open-minded environment. My experience of the city is part of my memory, part of the emotional dimension of my painting.

I become less emotionally involved in a painting when I am just dealing with composition or structure; the process changes, and it becomes less true to me. And it won't pull the viewer in. So my painting breaks away from that—it's different from a space that is embedded in a narrative handscroll painting, for instance, that's highly structured, representational, shared, and social, and that everyone can understand it.

Ink has core values: there's a nuance between wash and line and black and white that gives ink painting a kind of chromatic depth, and an idea of gesture and movement. There is a relativity to the black and white, an evolving relationship. But pictorial space is not just about technical work. The

Zheng Chongbin in his studio in San Rafael, California. Courtesy of the artist.

spaces I create change how I engage with the media. There's a kind of quiet emotional charge that I am aiming for. I don't mean a fast stroke indicates excitement, or that here in the pooled ink it's quiet and calm. I mean pushing the materials to their extreme, so that the viewer can sense I am working on the piece and the way I am looking at the painting, but only sense it. That sensation itself becomes a question, which may not have an answer.

Zheng Chongbin, *The Dimension of Ink, No. 1*, 2008, ink and acrylic on *xuan* paper, 144.8 x 302.3 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Lisa Claypool: Would you talk more about that notion of sensation as it relates to space? It seems critical to understand how ink painting—and the spaces for the beholder created through it—allows a special relationship between the picture and the individual viewer to develop, and perhaps we should also think about the state's new strategy of using ink painting—as propaganda as it is used to represent "China" or what might be thought of as specifically "Chinese" spaces.

Zheng Chongbin: In the imperial era, men of letters who were ink painters sometimes became reclusive and turned inwards to seek freedom from political life; I feel an affinity with them, but I don't want to turn away from society. My work is not political, though, in the way that contemporary Chinese art is identified as political, and especially not as the state is using ink art as propaganda. I want the ink to be part of a process, not a political symbol or commentary. It's a process of entering into something that is not measureable or mappable, where structure and form are present but also fall away and dissolve, where something edges its way into the messy process of how we "become" in the world. It's not about control; just the opposite. It's about an emotional opening up to that process of becoming.

Notes

[1] Geremie Barmé, "The Harmonious Evolution of Information in China," *China Beat*, http://www.thechinabeat.org/?p=1422.

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Art in America

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

Zheng Chongbin

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

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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**.

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SFGATE

Straus, Tamara, "Ink painter Zheng goes full circle with new show" *SFGATE*, May 18, 2011

ENTERTAINMENT

Ink painter Zheng goes full circle with new show

By **Tamara Straus**
May 18, 2011

Zheng Chongbin's "Evaporation,", an ink and acrylic on paper work from 2011, will be on exhibit at the Chinese Cultural Center.
Zheng Chongbin/Courtesy of the artist

Chinese ink painter Zheng goes full circle

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Zheng Chongbin has been called the **Jackson Pollock** of Chinese ink painting. It's an analogy that may help bring attention to his stunning, large-scale abstract paintings but one that Zheng resents, because Pollock manically poured and dripped oils onto canvas - whereas Zheng layers and enmeshes ink onto Xuan rice paper, using a physical technique that goes back thousands of years. Yet Zheng, like Pollock, seems to be drawing a bull's-eye on tradition. Born in Shanghai, he studied calligraphy and ink painting at the China National Academy of Fine Arts in the 1980s, where he and his fellow students were exposed to visiting artists from overseas.

"I sensed a limitation in Chinese paintings," explains Zheng. "Everything had become very formulaic. I looked at abstract paintings from the West, and there was an astonishing physicality. I never wanted to let go of the core things in Chinese painting, such as how to utilize space through your body gesture, but I learned to make new textures, introduced elements of light and looked for a new way to generate my basic visual structures."

In 1991, Zheng was selected by the **San Francisco Art Institute** to become its first international fellow. Here, he immersed himself in performance and installation art - a detour, says **Chinese Culture Center** curator **Abby Chen**, which "allowed him a means to understand his new artistic environment and the practice of Western contemporary art unrestrained by the cultural burden of ink." But now, says Chen, he has returned to ink with vigor.

The results of this return are on view tonight at the Chinese Culture Center on the third floor of San Francisco's Chinatown Hilton. There through July 30 are 15 newly commissioned paintings that demonstrate Zheng's extraordinary talents. Not only are the paintings arresting in their beauty - some summon woods dappled with light, others the innards of waterfalls - but they make you think about one of the oldest continuous artistic traditions (Chinese ink painting dates to 400 B.C.), the continuing march of abstract painting, and the rising power of bicultural artists like Zheng who combine and transcend disparate traditions.

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In addition to the paintings, Zheng has created a video piece and an installation that riff on and explain the underpinnings of his artwork. The free solo show, called "**White Ink**," is a huge feat for the Chinese Culture Center. Chen and **Mabel Teng**, the center's executive director, selected Zheng from a competition process and have been working with the artist and fundraising for the show for an entire year.

"We are trying to dispel the myth that Chinatown is insular, that we don't have quality art," says Teng. "White Ink" should do the trick.

The free opening, 5-7 p.m. tonight at 750 Kearny St., will be followed by a $25 7-9 p.m. benefit for the Northern Japan Earthquake Relief Fund, called **Sumie Sounds**, featuring jazz and Sumie ink painting. For more information, go to www.c-c-c.org or call (415) 986-1822.

E-mail Tamara Straus at datebookletters@sfchronicle.com.

May 18, 2011

By **Tamara Straus**

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South China Morning Post

Daswani, Kavita, "King of ink," *South China Morning Postl*, May 8, 2011

King of ink

Kavita Daswani

To Zheng Chongbin, ink is like a lead character in a play, the star of his shows. Ask him to talk about his fascination with ink, and he renders an elegant and articulate viewpoint as to why this is his preferred medium, referring to its many nuances, tonalities and layers.

The contemporary artist will share his affinity with ink during INKquiry, his first ever Hong Kong show that opens this week and runs until June 4. Organised by Ooi Botos art gallery in a pop-up space in Chai Wan, the exhibition features 12 pieces, all created by Zheng specifically for the event in his studio in San Francisco. There, says Zheng - who also spends much of his time on mainland China - he can work in a 'cohesive flow'.

'I can keep my focus on the work, and can be in touch with the depth of the ink, and the physicality and scale of the work.'

In international art circles, Zheng has carved out a name for himself as a resolutely modern and contemporary ink artist, his dramatic, monochromatic pieces inspired

as much by, say, different projections of nature as by his own musings about the idea of what he is looking at.

There is a spare, abstract quality to his work, which can challenge conventional notions of traditional Chinese landscape ink painting. His repertoire has seen him exhibit at top-tier museums such as the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, the Shanghai Art Museum and Pacific Asia Museum in Los Angeles.

Zheng is credited with pushing the boundaries of ink painting and he will be speaking, on May 23, at an Asia Society panel discussion on The Future of Contemporary Ink Painting. This is a subject, after all, that Zheng spends much of his time thinking about. 'There has been a lot of attention on how ink media is shifting,' he says, adding that so far, his work has tended to be acquired primarily by collectors in the West.

'My idea is that because ink is so unique, it has a lot of resonance in terms of the reference to classic Chinese paintings. There are lots of dimensions coming out of the ink that don't exist in contemporary art paintings. I want people to start looking at ink as more universal, and in a broader context.'

Zheng was born in Shanghai in 1961, before the Cultural Revolution. When his neighbours were summarily 'retired' from politics, they would paint every day, while the young Zheng would look on, enthralled. From them, he learnt his first technical skills. By the time he was a teenager, he had acquired a profound love of painting, and was working with a teacher who showed him how to practise by painting daily.

'He took me to museums, put me in a class, and that's how I really started studying this media.'

He received his bachelor's in fine arts from the Chinese Painting Department of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou (since renamed the China Academy of Fine Arts), where he taught for four years after graduation. In 1991, he enrolled in the master's programme at the San Francisco Art Institute. 'It certainly was the place I wanted to be,' he says of his move. 'Being in San Francisco, there is a lot of support from the international art community. I can work with people anywhere, and am also very involved in the Bay Area.'

Not that there weren't assimilation issues. 'Initially, it was difficult to establish myself,' Zheng says. 'There was culture shock. I was an immigrant and there was a big adjustment in every aspect of my life. But I was in a fellowship programme and quickly merged into the art community. I just love the experience of living here, to be able to incorporate daily life into art.'

Zheng bemoans the ongoing dilemma in the US where budgets for art programmes in public schools are being slashed. 'It's terrible,' he says. 'Art should be a fundamental part of everyone's education. It's important because art can broaden the view of kids and young people, expand their imagination and change the way they look at the world. It's the main ingredient to being creative in life.'
In China, he says, an education in fine arts has been expanded to encompass everything from graphics to fashion design. He remembers when he was at art

school in Hangzhou, when there were only 60 students a year. Now, he says, there are thousands - but many focus primarily on commercial art.

'There is more of a perception now, even in China, that art is a money-making career,' he says.

Certainly, in recent years, prices for Chinese art have been driven sky-high by collectors who are happy to pay top dollar for what they covet. But Zheng says this trend is a skewed perception of the intrinsic value of art on the mainland.

'Collectors are interested as long as there is market value,' he says. But he feels the academic value should be the most important thing. 'There are a few artists I know who are not even aware how much people are paying for their work. To them, it is irrelevant, and when they find out, they feel it's shocking or strange.

'To an artist, when the work is done, it's done. When it goes into someone else's hands, then it's time to start working on something else.

But, he admits, 'at the same time it is wonderful to have collectors who can [provide] the means by which we can keep working'.

INKquiry, ArtEast Island, Unit 614, 6/F Chai Wan Industrial City Phase 1, 60 Wing Tai Road, Chai Wan, Friday to June 4. Future of Contemporary Ink Painting panel discussion hosted by the Asia Society, May 23, 6.30pm, Agnes b Cinema, the HK Art Centre