

Chen Haiyan, Carving the Unconscious
Curated by Britta Erickson

Opening Reception: September 14, 4 - 6pm
Exhibition Date: September 14 - November 3, 2013

The newly established Beijing art gallery *Ink Studio* is delighted to announce its second exhibition, of prints and paintings in ink on paper by artist Chen Haiyan.

Chen Haiyan 陳海燕 (b. 1955) is widely recognized as one of the most important Chinese artists *carving* woodcuts today. She is also an accomplished ink painter and these two media—woodcuts and ink painting—have become inextricably linked in her artistic process. Uniting traditional elite aesthetics with a rough vernacular quality, style and medium work seamlessly together as Chen renders her subject matter, which consists of dream images from her *unconscious*, with an unparalleled sense of emotional directness,

The experience of growing up in China's industrial northeast and then moving to the south, to Hangzhou, has invested Chen Haiyan's art with a unique combination of earthiness and refinement, of strength and grace. As a child she lived largely unsupervised in her grandparents' farmhouse on the outskirts of the city of Yingkou, surrounded by animals and plants. When she ventured into the city, the art of the 1970s was all propaganda, and art pedagogy focused on drawing from life to create basic solid forms. Moving to Hangzhou to enroll at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now the National Academy of Fine Arts), the gentle landscape and elegant literati painting of artists such as Huang Binhong drew her interest. While maintaining her interest in painting, she studied printmaking, a form of art with a very long history in China. Printmaking had not, however, been considered a high art until the 1930s when the communists recognized its value as a medium for spreading ideas, and artists communicating with woodcut artist Käthe Kollwitz were attracted to its facility for communicating strong emotions—something previously lacking in Chinese art.

In the 1980s Chen Haiyan began keeping dream diaries, a habit that continues to this day. At the time, she was obliged to publicly produce politically palatable images of factories and other signs of socialist progress and kept her dream works for a small but highly appreciative audience. Now she bases all her paintings and prints on material drawn from her dream diaries, with subjects ranging from the everyday to the surreal: van Gogh buying a watch at a flea market; the artist dancing with a giant cat; a huge manmade iceberg in West Lake; chasing birds in an old house.

Chen's prints, beginning as they do with an ink painting on wood, underscore the link between brushwork and carving (traditionally the carving of seals), as well as the importance of the compositional balance between figure and ground—Chen often switches in a single work between relief and intaglio. She says, "My works entail transforming rice paper into wood with the help of the Chinese brush. I first use an expansive freehand style of painting on the wooden block and later when I am carving I more carefully actualize the picture that is in my heart and give shape to

it.” Next to the imagery she writes the dream text drawn from the diary, integrating text and image – a time-honored aspect of traditional Chinese painting.

Chen Haiyan works equally well in small and very large scale. She infuses her boldly colored paintings with expansive verve and her prints, ranging up to 2.5 meters or 8 feet tall, are equally powerful. Eschewing the easy route of the printing press, Chen instead painstakingly hand presses the paper to the carved and inked block, using a burnisher. To produce fine lines the ink must be taken up by the paper gradually, necessitating three or more inkings and burnishings. Printing one sheet may take a day but the result is strikingly clear lines and a glorious even black.

Chen Haiyan applies her mastery of the brushwork and spatial composition required to work on an oversize scale—gained from her experience creating ever-larger woodcuts—to produce monumental paintings. Like many of China’s greatest modern calligrapher-seal-carver-painters such as Zhao Zhiqian, Wu Changshi and Qi Baishi, she balances her powerful and carved brushwork with intense, saturated colors. Whereas her carving-painting predecessors applied their *da xieyi* or “bold, calligraphically-expressive” painting style within traditional painting formats, Chen creates images on a monumental scale better suited to contemporary art.

Chen is currently a senior professor in the Print Department of the National Academy of Fine Arts (formerly the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts) in Hangzhou. This is the first time that her monumental ink paintings and her woodcut prints have been exhibited together.

Ink Studio is responding to new and exciting developments in the media of ink painting currently emanating from China. In its upcoming exhibitions program *Ink Studio* will seek to demonstrate how a group of important artists have, over the past decades, been highly active in researching and developing the immense contemporary creative possibilities of the Chinese painting tradition of paper and ink. These artists’ work is increasingly attracting serious international critical attention. *Ink Studio*’s mission is to present the best of this new work to the public in a closely curated exhibition program supported by in-depth critical analysis, scholarly exchange and bi-lingual publishing in Chinese and English.