

Zheng Chongbin

Concrete Ink Painting and Cinematic Ink

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At the present moment, there are ink painters who think in terms of space, even as the appearance of space evolves through tactile sensation, metaphysical exploration, and historical memory. Zheng Chongbin is an artist fascinated by the myriad possibilities as to how these seemingly divergent, acutely distinct approaches to ink painting can function. His ineluctable manner of addressing the formal attributes of ink painting occurs entirely without hesitation or compromise. His sense of structural intuition transcends many of the academic ink practitioners working in China today. Zheng's spatial inventiveness is less formal than emancipatory, closer to the Daoist concept of *ziran*, where the focus on nature is given to intuition and spontaneity, as in the pouring of ink, or in letting the ink pour.¹

This approach to nature carries with it a complex analysis and manner of operation deeply embedded within the tradition of Chinese ink. Curator and scholar Craig Yee has researched another important concept found in the paintings of Zheng as well, the concept of *qiyun*. Yee specifically addresses the historical subtleties accessible in studying the artist's work. According to

¹ The Chinese term, *ziran* (*tzu-jan*), ordinarily translated as "nature," literally means "of itself so." The English equivalent would be "spontaneity." Alan W. Watts, *Nature, Man and Woman*, (New York: Pantheon, 1958), 18.

Yee, “Zheng Chongbin manages to create images, forms, and objects that not only embody an ancient Chinese cosmology but simultaneously reflect our contemporary human experience.”² In his essay, “The Classical Origins of Contemporary Abstraction,” Yee accurately defines the Chinese concept of *qiyun* as “the carrier of this resonance-based sharing of perceptual experience is the media of brush, ink, and paper.”³ He then goes on to cite the artist’s highly insightful observation that “the aesthetic contents of Chinese ink painting differ from that of any other aesthetic system in that the presence of *qiyun* (vital resonance) is always the core requirement.”⁴

Through *qiyun*, Zheng may have located a rarified meeting-ground somewhere between Chan and the Dao. The foundation of his aesthetic is an angular planar space partially derived from the process of pouring ink and brushing paint. In the process of working, Zheng is capable of sustaining a pulse or a rhythm – an indelible activation that gives the ink a sudden unseen vibration without visible pause. This is true throughout the act of painting. The intervals occur merely to shift gears from one application to another, always focused on the specific instant in relation to the general scope of how the *yin-yang* blends ink with acrylic paint. It is the instant when they seem to merge, break apart, and ineffably coalesce. This is the point where the artist succumbs to the tactile sensation that marks the absence of his identity. This is the instant when Zheng’s advanced, if not radical approach to ink layering and saturation, shifts back and forth, across unrolled sections of xuan paper.

² Craig Yee, “The Classical Origins of Contemporary Abstraction,” *Zheng Chongbin: Impulse, Matter, Form* (New York and Beijing: Ink Studio, 2014), 31.

³ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

A major aspect of Zheng's painting is, in fact, the integration between his deep regard for the Chinese tradition of ink painting that he integrates with articulations of concrete planar space. Not only is this aspect of his work crucial to the manner in which he paints, but also original. By original, I refer to the means by which to discover a way to paint abstract planar spaces normally associated with Western Modernism. One cannot ignore the importance of Zheng's achievement in this regard. As art historian Britta Erickson has surmised: "Zheng Chongbin's late twentieth and early twentieth-first century abstractions evince an awareness of the genre's many threads, while simultaneously spinning a new one. His oeuvre thus adds to the exchange between Euro-American abstraction and East Asian art and philosophy ..."⁵ In the artist's *Wall of Skies* (2015), a light-space ink installation shown last summer at Ink Studio gallery in Beijing, the reference to planar space is so adept in its facticity, and so correct within the logic of his approach, that it would be impossible to disregard as integral to the tradition of ink painting in China. The planar elements were fixed so exactly at alternating dark and light intervals, they appeared to reveal the presence of a sensory concrete galaxy at the core of an underlying structure coordinating the artist's idea of pictorial space.

Born in Shanghai, in 1961, Zheng studied art in the Chinese Painting Department at the prestigious Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now China Academy of Art) in Hangzhou, China. Upon graduating in 1984, he was given his first important solo exhibition at the Shanghai Art Museum in 1988. At the time, Zheng had already decided to migrate to northern

⁵ Britta Erickson, "Establishing Spirit in the Sea of Ink: Zheng Chongbin from Impulse to Form," in *Zheng Chongbin*, 5.

California and do graduate work at the San Francisco Art Institute, where he received his MFA degree in 1991. Since then, the artist has divided his time between northern California and Shanghai where he continues to maintain a studio. To date he has had more than a dozen solo exhibitions, and has been included in many important group exhibitions throughout Asia, Europe, and the United States.

Zheng Chongbin's current participation in the Armory exhibition in New York City (2016) offers audiences the opportunity to view the current state of his art from both a painterly and cinematic perspective. A similar approach was offered in 2015 at the previously cited Ink Studio exhibition where, in addition to *Wall of Skies*, his video, *Chimeric Landscape* (2015), was being shown concurrently in two locations: Beijing and the Biennale di Venezia. The video has been given serious independent attention by various artists and scholars. In an extensively researched and thoughtful essay, published last year in *Yishu*, Dr. Maya Kóvskaya made an astute observation on Zheng's *Chimeric Landscape*: "While the forms conjured up by the artist using ink seem to be mysterious, alchemic transformations, the trajectory of movement from formless to fractal is shaped by larger forces at work in the universe that span the macro to the micro level of being and exhibit the transformational dynamics of 'becoming' that scientists and philosophers have pondered and described at great length across disciplines."⁶

In *Chimeric Landscape*, the flow of the ink, mixing in water, often in varied colors, allude to both conceptual and epistemological "variations on a

⁶ Maya Kóvskaya, "Becoming Landscape: Diffractive Unfoldings of Light, Space, and Matter in the New Work of Zheng Chongbin," *Yishu*, Vol. 14, No. 6 (2015), 14.

theme.” In addition, Zheng’s 17-minute hallucinogenic landscape erotically transforms into an internally projected mindscape. The impact on some viewers was nothing less than remarkable as fluid forms of optical kinesis, such as those discovered in a Northern Song Dynasty landscape. The shrubs, trees, mountains, streams, and valleys transport the optical gaze outside of fiction into a metonym focusing on the origins of life and the aura one finds whilst becoming attuned to them. In *Chimeric Landscape*, the forms are equally seen, but from the perspective of a promiscuously engaged microscopic journey, one in search of resuscitation, the lost intervals bent on nerve-endings when karma billows into space-time.

The ink paintings on display at the Armory are all on traditional xuan paper, and mounted on corrugated aluminum panels. The centerpiece among them is a diptych, titled *Visible Veins* (2016). The deep blackness of this two-paneled work is dynamic as a work given to incessant layers of ink poured over and against planes of acrylic paint. Although monochromatic through its saturation of ink and acrylic, there is heightened visible texture, a kind of timbre or sense of haptic remorse that suggests surface depth and the interplay between inks and pigments loosely handled, which are generally fixed in relation to the saturated pours hardened from earlier saturations. Given the artist’s previous smaller ensemble of paintings, titled *Dark Veins* (2013), Zheng employs poured overlays of ink on acrylic, creating a deepened monochromatic effect, not without topographic fields under and over resident spatial fields that appear to interrupt and absorb one another. In *Visible Veins*, the diptych reveals diagonal fissures, a technique the artist has used for several years and which comes closest to a European (Bauhaus) Constructivism or a post-Bauhaus Concrete aesthetic.

Other attendant works included in this exhibition are less densely saturated paintings, such as *The Removal of Land* (2015), a work in which separated sheets of xuan (mounted together on corrugated aluminum) are overlaid opposite one another as a single whole. A related painting, titled *Unfolding Landscape* (2015), holds a book-like presence revealed by ink marked sheets of xuan that appear in the wake of opening or closing, suspended in time. Both paintings, in some sense, have evolved as far back as Shitao (1642 – 1707), a Buddhist monk at the outset of the Qing Dynasty, who was an iconoclastic ink painter, who went against the rules in order to advance a tradition of expression “the primordial mark,” free from the academic constraints of the past.⁷ This would have to include the sixth century scholar and artist Xie He, the author of the *huihua liufa* (Six Laws of Chinese Painting) that prescribed a rigid manner in which ink painters should proceed in order to achieve the appearance of acceptable paintings.⁸

To ascertain whether Zheng Chongbin is a true iconoclast in the art of ink painting would require substantial research, and I am not certain such a task is relevant or would prove anything substantial. However, the fact that Zheng works in relation to this tradition suggests that he is aware of the tradition from whence he has evolved. It is now time for something new, which, of course, Zheng’s paintings are clearly envisioning another potential for art whence the hemispheres can be read in relation to one another. From a Structuralist point of view, Zheng is working at a moment when the

⁷ Zheng Chongbin, “My Reading of Shitao’s *Remarks on Painting*,” in *Zheng Chongbin*, 75 – 81.

⁸ Zheng Chongbin, “A Reordering of Xie He’s Six Laws,” in *Zheng Chongbin*, 82 – 91.

diachronic evolution of history is becoming usurped by a lateral synchrony cross-cut in which we are in constant touch with the present, acknowledging multiple points of view with infinite references.⁹ Perhaps, the issue is less about Zheng Chongbin's iconoclasm that his ability to absorb the art of two hemispheres in a simultaneous unified glance and to allow the ink to flow.

⁹ Jean Piaget, *Structuralism*, trans. Chaninah Maschler (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 106 – 119.