

*With a Sudden Vigor it Doth Possess:*  
Zheng Chongbin's Recent Paintings and Video Work  
Mark Van Proyen

Twenty years ago, Deconstruction was the most over-used word in the art world. Its origin went two decades further back, and the French philosopher Jacques Derrida gets credit for coining it. His intent in doing so was not in any service to a new philosophical understanding, but was instead a demonstration that the very idea of philosophical understanding was fatally tied to what he called "the metaphysics of presence," which in his view always defaulted to assumptions that privileged the historical lies told by power at the colonizing expense of other stories. For several decades, art has at long last labored to give form and voice to those stories, or, working in another register, has tried to lay bare the representational mechanisms of meaning-making disassociated from the idealizing gloss of "artistry." The results of these pursuits oftentimes looked more like a conjectural algebra of open-ended (read: isolated) visual symptoms than anything that we might think of as being an integrated work of art.

Given that so much has been written about the deconstruction of artistic form during the past four decades, it might now be time to look at the work of some artists as being "preconstructive" in its essential character. I mean to suggest that such works are not to be taken as any exercise in ideological codification that invite arguments for or against the ways that they finesse the conflict between myth and history. Instead they should be seen as reminders of what a pre-coded state of physical and emotional being might look, and more importantly, feel like. This recognition should not be read as an invitation to erase the boundary between form and chaos; instead, we should see it as a prompt to recognize the fact that the very ideas of form and chaos are both misleading illusions of not outright falsehoods. Certainly, both are psychologically necessary aids to our navigation of life's path, but for that very reason, they are also fun house mirrors that selectively reflect and refract the planes and angles of experience in ways that divert us from understanding its vital core.

Anyone who has ever mixed paint should know something about the fluctuating boundary between form and chaos. That same person should also know about the marvelous flows of coalescence and dispersal that occur when two or more colors are blended into each other. This is an understandable fascination, at once teased by a simple exercise in practical chemistry and at the same time richly suggestive of the microcosmic and macrocosmic processes that animate and order the world's being. In those slipstream moments before the fluidity of paint solidifies into stable tangibility, we see intimations of the energetic processes that reveal the *prima materia* of nature as being a dynamic force that exists in advance of the world's forms. Once we have registered this fact, we can then understand how those energetic processes continue to subtly inhabit all tangible things, which in many cases are but deceptive masks of momentary convenience operating in deferential relation to the differentiating powers of language. In other words, such visible flowings have the potential to taunt those feeble and paltry thing that we call words.

In so doing, they also taunt you and me for relying too heavily on the things that they can do for us.

For Zheng Chongbin, the transformative dance that occurs between the coalescence and dispersal of fluid material is nothing less than the great subject of his impressive and seductive art. It is at once rooted in the fourteen hundred year-old tradition of Chinese landscape painting, and at the same time it is also a radical departure from that tradition, pointed in the direction of contemporary ideas about the alignment of geomantic ideas and geological structures replacing biologically-derived “anthropocene” metaphors as the presiding symbols of a newly emergent global culture. During the past several years, Chongbin has become ever more interested in the writings of Robert Smithson, which among other things, argued toward the erasure of the normal distinctions that we tend to make between human time and geological time—reconfiguring what the word “archeological” might be taken to mean. For Smithson, art existed as a way of self-consciously participating in processes that reveal themselves to be traces of visible energy and material marking the time of their own formulation, and the question of whether or not there might be any human direction of this process, or any coherent human motivation behind that direction, are at best trifling, and cannot lead to meaningful answers.

For well over two decades, Chongbin has used Chinese ink mixed with acrylic gesso to make paintings on sheets of sandalwood paper. He sometimes combines more than one sheets into large, overlapping collage forms that form skewed sequences, as if each segment is a single component of a complex, subtly shifting spine of painterly registers. More often, he uses a single 60 by 40 inch sheet in either a horizontal or vertical format. Sandalwood paper (or Xuan paper) is an ideal surface for painting with inks of different dilution and tonalities. Even though it is perfectly absorbent, it has a distinctive texture and is surprisingly durable owing to the tight, papyrus-like weave of its fibers. From the standpoint of traditional Asian painting, it is the perfect surface to capture the “bone method” of the master painter’s brush—by some accounts preferable to the rarer and more expensive silk that was favored by the court painters of the Song and Yuan dynasties. That much said, it is also important to note Chongbin gives only minimal emphasis to the use of the brush, preferring instead to direct the flow of paint with other tools and methods, many of which are more akin to the processes of American color field painters such as Morris Louis and Helen Frankenthaler, or Korean *Tansaekhwa* painters such as Kim Whanki and Kwon Young Woo.

Because the inks that Chongbin uses have the consistency of water, they infuse the thicker gesso with unpredictable interactions that are later fossilized into fractal indices when the painting dries. These seemingly random index-shapes sometimes take on the aspects of fractal geometry, creating streams of rhizomorphic form that might resemble nerve ganglia or the branched alveoli of lung tissue. This effect is most pronounced in darker works such as *Shaped Reflection* or *Descend From Light*, which tend to be vertically formatted and often folded and/or pleated surfaces. Often times, these works feature suggest some kind of animating energy source located just beyond the top or side of the works’ compositions, indicated by sets of radiating diagonal lines moving toward the work’s center. In other cases, such as the 2015 work titled *Crystalline No. 3*, the white gesso dominates the images.

Works such as this tend to be either square or horizontally formatted, and they sport softer more indistinct edges owing to a more liberal use of collaging layers of paper and gesso. This gives them a more lyrical and comforting demeanor than the one that emerges from the darker, vertically formatted works. But whether or not the white is given primary emphasis, it always seems especially phosphorescent to the viewer's eye, looking rather like the bioluminescent foam of cresting sea waves. Even when the black ink is given the greater emphasis, the white still bespeaks a magical radiance, sometimes looking like swarms of fireflies congregating in a moonless night.

There is more at stake in the diametrical mirroring of these two series than a simple contrast of light and dark, which in itself can be said to echo the yin and yang energies of the cosmos. It also bespeaks the formal distinctions that we might note when comparing the delicate and evanescent tradition of the southern Song tradition from the more dramatic and austere approaches favored by the painters of the northern Song and Yuan dynasties. Differences of geography and climate might account for this distinction, but one thing that remains constant is the recognition that painting is a practice intimately linked to the conjuring of the dragon energies that inhabit the forms of the world. This point is also at the core of Chongbin's work, even though it travels an abstract path by means that redefine the crucial role formerly played by brush. His own brand of geomancy updates those of the ancient painters by taking into account some of the things that we have learned from modern science, one of those being that gravity itself is now known to be a fluctuation of waves and another being that the tectonic forces of the earth are indeed in a state of perpetual and unpredictable motion. The paint itself tells us that this is true, and Chongbin does a masterful job in facilitating this telling.

During the past year, Chongbin has turned his attention to video production so that he might animate digitized images of fluidity with editing techniques that are in themselves fluid insofar as they feature subtle fades, soft wipes and ghosted overlays of photographic captures of flowing liquids. Early last year, he collaborated with the San Francisco-based video production company Obscura Digital to create *Chimeric Landscape*, a 16-minute image sequence set up as an installation. This work was featured in a collateral exhibition held during the 55<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennial, curated by Maya Kovskaya at the Palazzo Bembo. In a darkened room, the viewer witnesses slow fades of undulate water streaming over and across submerged barriers juxtaposed with stationary shots of ink of various viscosities slowly spreading through paper and fabric, followed by what seems to be another sequence interlocked diagram intended to approximate the wave rhythms previously pictured. There are many ways of interpreting this mesmerizing work, but the one that I keep coming back to is the way that it functions as a poetic exegesis designed to provide elaboration upon the way a viewer might experience the paintings. Once one has seen *Chimeric Landscape*, it cannot be unseen; it haunts the viewer's mind as he or she tries to gain perceptual footing in the world of the paintings. And once so haunted, the mind finds it easier to be properly immersed in their unique address to the problem of giving visibility to invisible geomantic energies.

煥發活力：  
鄭重賓近期畫作及錄像作品  
馬克·凡·波萊恩

「解構」一詞是二十年前常被藝術界濫用的語彙。此概念可回溯至四十年前，當時由法國哲學家雅克·德里達提出，原意不為建立全新的哲學理解，而是展示西方哲學理解的概念如何受到他所稱的「在場形上學」約束。他認為「在場形上學」是一種既定前設，由支配他者論述的特權，虛構出歷史謊言而成。過去數十年來，藝術一直為這些論述賦予形態及話語權，或脫離「藝術性」的理想化演繹，試圖具體展示創造意義的方法，而從中得出的結果，相比起我們稱為藝術作品，通常更像開放式結局（或應稱為「與現實脫節」）視覺表徵的假設符號。

憑藉過去四十年多年來眾多有關藝術解構主義的論述，我們現可深入審視一些以「預構」為要素的藝術家作品。我認為這些作品並非用以界定思想法則，也無須對其處理神話與史實之間矛盾的策略，激發支持與反對的爭論。相反，作品應被視為一種提醒，理解身心在視覺以至感覺上呈現的預設狀態。此區別並不在於清除組織與混亂之間的界線，而是印證兩者的觀念均源自片面虛想帶來的誤導性幻象。組織與混亂的狀態無疑是人生導向的心理要素，更有如遊樂場的哈哈鏡，局部地反映及折射人生經歷中的不同層面與角度，使我們無法集中理解事物核心。

若曾嘗試混合顏料，定能從中了解組織與混亂之間的可變界限，同時亦可感受到色彩結合的奇妙流動，以及兩種或多種色彩融為一體時的擴散效果。這是可具體理解的動人力量，一方面展示實用化學的簡單原理，另一方面充分反映帶動萬物活力與規律的微觀及宏觀過程。從液態顏料穩定凝固前的流動狀態，我們可觀察到能量運行過程的痕跡，展現大自然的原始本質，體驗超越世界形貌的動態力量。當我們辨明箇中事實，便可進一步了解運行的過程如何微妙地存在於各種具體事物之中，而當中許多情況卻是一時簡便的虛假掩飾，只順從語言的分異力量而來。換句話說，這些可見的流動狀態便有可能推倒軟弱無力、微不足道的事物——我們稱之為文字；更直指過分依賴事物的你和我。

對鄭重賓而言，液態媒材結合與分散的變異悸動為他帶來不可多得的題材，成就迷幻動人的創作。這種概念起源於四百年前的國畫傳統，同時卻又果敢脫離傳統，以地相與地質結構並重的當代理念為方向，取代以生物學「人類世」理論作為環球文化全新崛起的主導象徵。鄭氏在過去數年來對羅伯特·史密森的著作尤感興趣，當中論及應否清除人類時間與地質時期的慣常區別，重新審視「考古」可能包含的意義。史密森認為藝術是自覺參與不同過程的表現，從中展示能量動勢及媒材以獨有公式標記時間的痕跡，並提出過程中是否涉及人為導引，或是在導引方向背後人類動機存在與否的疑問，看來其實是微不足道，未能帶來有意義的答案。

鄭氏在二十多年來一直以水墨及壓克力底料於檀香紙上創作。他不時會組合多張紙幅，構成大型重疊、斑駁起伏的拼貼形態，每一環節均是錯綜複雜、變化微妙的繪畫骨幹之中的獨立部分。他更經常運用 60 x 40 英寸的橫直紙本創作。呈現

水墨的深淺濃淡，以檀香紙（或宣紙）最佳，縱然吸水性強，然而其材質獨特，憑構造細密、如莎草紙強韌的紙漿纖維，尤為耐用。這更是彰顯「骨法用筆」的完美紙材，相比宋元宮廷畫師喜用較為罕有昂貴的絹本更勝一籌。另外，鄭氏不以筆觸為重，而是運用其他工具及方法引流墨彩，與莫里士·路易斯及海倫·弗蘭肯瑟勒等美國色域畫家，以及韓國單色畫家金煥基及權寧禹的創作過程相似。

鄭氏用墨的水色一致，較濃稠的壓克力底料，帶來變幻莫測的結合反應，最終在顏料乾透後沉澱成碎形標記。這些看來隨性的標記形態往往牽涉碎形幾何學，當中所創的連串根狀形態有如人體裡的神經節或肺部組織的支肺泡，在鄭氏較深沉的作品如《帶有形的反光》及《沉降的光》中可見一斑，常以可折疊及／或打褶的直幅畫面創作而成。當中不少作品構圖的上方或側處暗示動感的能量來源，以放射形的斜線向畫作中心擴展。其他創作如 2015 年的《水晶線 No.3》則以白色壓克力底料為構圖重心。此類作品多以正方或橫幅創作，拼貼層次及運用底料的技巧更自由奔放，界線顯得較為輕柔模糊，相比漆黑的直幅作品，塑造出更生動抒情、泰然安逸的氛圍。然而不論白色是否焦點所在，看來卻總是明亮璀璨，引人注目，猶如海浪沖擦而成的自然白沫。縱以黑墨作畫，白調依然綻放奇幻光芒，有時更如漆黑夜裡的發光發亮的螢火蟲。

兩個創作系列的相對狀態絕不僅是明暗的簡單對比，更反映陰陽的宇宙能量，同時亦展示兩代畫風的明顯特徵，比照南宋畫作精緻纖巧的傳統與北宋及元代畫家較為宏偉莊嚴的創作方式。當中的風格差異或受到不同的地理及氣候影響，然而當中不變之道在於畫作關乎天地間風水龍氣。這亦是鄭氏作品的精髓所在，然而他以抽象方式表達氣韻，重新定義筆觸向來的關鍵作用。他以現代科學知識發展其獨創的地相理念，為古代畫家的風水學說帶來更新，例如現今人們認知重力的起伏波動，而地球構造作用力的運動是恆常不斷而無法預測。顏料的流動狀態已為我們帶來實證，而鄭氏更是技藝精湛，全然表達箇中意義。

鄭氏去年把焦點轉向錄像創作，以流動題材製作數碼動畫影像，運用剪接技巧展示流動影像中微妙漸褪、輕柔消逝與陰影重疊。他在去年初與三藩市多媒體科技公司 Obscura Digital 合作創出《異化的風景》，以十六分鐘的影像集結成裝置作品。此作於第五十五屆威尼斯雙年展期間於本博宮展出，策展人為美國藝評家邁涯。在漆黑房間之中，觀者可細緻觀察水面波瀾起伏的緩慢消長，並以濃淡水墨的固定錄影並置，觀察墨色慢慢在紙筋間不斷擴張，其後以另一畫面連接影像，模擬先前投映的波浪節奏。

本作迷濛奧妙，引人入勝，可以不同方式探討詮釋，然而我經常類似為詩批注的方式解讀作品，為觀者感受畫作的方式提供深入闡述。《異化的風景》令觀者一看難忘，不斷縈繞腦海，引領觀者尋求畫中世界的感性聯繫。一旦這些影像深植心中，觀者更能從中潛心思考如何為無形的地相能量賦予形態。