

PearlLam Galleries

Beyond Black and White: Chinese Contemporary Abstract Ink

Pearl Lam Galleries is pleased to present *Beyond Black and White*; an exhibition showcasing works by eight Chinese contemporary ink artists. These artists are part of a growing circle in China that draws inspiration from traditional Chinese ink painting and its philosophy as well as Chinese calligraphy.

The medium and technique of ink and brush plays a significant role for these artists as they seek to display the unique heritage of Chinese artistic culture in a new, contemporary context that reflects today's globalised world. The philosophy of ink also plays a central role among contemporary ink artists and is the energy transmitted from the artist into the work. This energy expresses another realm of beauty that goes beyond the visual quality of the painting. This is known as Qi, or vitality, and is one of the *Six Principles of Chinese Painting*, established by Xie He in the 5th century. This exhibition aims to address the role of ink and its enduring philosophy in contemporary China and challenge the traditional use of the medium.

Artists first began to experiment with ink painting in the 1980s, when widespread reform in China allowed for increasing openness with the rest of the world. Over the last three decades, with the influx of western art and culture, Chinese artists have significantly developed the language of ink and restored the medium to have a newfound relevance today. They use elements from their culture's past to explain how they perceive the world today.

Ink painting (*shui-mo* 水墨) can be traced back hundreds of years through China's long and distinguished artistic history. It is considered to be the highest form of literati art and the greatest measure of a scholar's creativity. The concept of literati painting was first put forward by Dong Qichang (1555-1636) in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) but can be traced back as far as the Tang dynasty (618-907) when the great poet, Wang Wei (699-759), included calligraphy, poetry and seal carvings in his painting. Painting, calligraphy, seal carving and poetry were considered the four main accomplishments of the scholar-official class. Even today, with its close ties to calligraphy, ink painting remains one of the cornerstones of Chinese civilisation.

The artists in *Beyond Black and White* are all deeply indebted to Chinese culture and art history, using these traditions to guide their work and embracing a wide range of sources including Chinese calligraphy, landscape painting and poetry. Whether it manifests itself through the medium, the philosophy or the form, they all draw inspiration from the classical canon. "It is a Chinese art practice with an unparalleled density, complexity, and historical depth of reference," says Professor James Elkins, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, USA. Elkins emphasises that Chinese ink painting is unparalleled because there is no other genre of Chinese art that requires the viewer to have such an extensive background in Chinese history and culture. Furthermore, he feels that not all art produced on rice paper using ink and brush should be called ink painting. Ink painting, as is the case in this exhibition, is used as an umbrella term to describe works of various medium and technique.

Feng Mengbo (b. 1966) and Wang Tiande (b. 1960) are two artists whose pioneering works experiment with new mediums without abandoning the deep-rooted connection to China's artistic past. Feng Mengbo is a leading new media artist in China who has worked at the junction of painting and digital media since the early 1990s. He has constantly combined the digital and the handmade, as well as the past and the present, in a thought-provoking and dynamic way. Beginning in 2005, he returned to painting without abandoning his deep immersion in the cyber-world, allowing him to review traditional Chinese culture in his own unique way. This piece, "*not too late*" is inspired by a video game in which he omits the

moving figures and images from the original version to form strong calligraphic lines, much like the bold brushworks of the masters.

Wang Tiande aims to re-contextualise tradition within a contemporary framework through ink paintings, digital compositions and installations. He captures a new form of expression that reflects today's contemporary culture while incorporating traditional literati concepts. He recreates ink brush painting for the twenty-first century. This exhibition features his established '*Digital series*' where he burns symbols, which resemble Chinese characters, onto rice paper. The burn marks are made with an incense stick or cigarette, creating shapes and spaces, similar to that of landscapes, water and mountains. His innovative approach does not dispel the significance and influence of tradition in his work; rather, he embraces traditional concepts and methods while injecting a modern perspective that is fresh and distinctly his own.

Qiu Deshu (b. 1948) was among the artists who cofounded the post-Mao experimental art group called the Grass Painting Society (*caocao huashe*) in the 1970s. In the early 1980s, he developed his signature style of works called "fissuring" (*lie bian*). The concept of "fissuring", which literally means tearing and changing in Chinese, is a pictorial metaphor for the artist's life and as his artistic career, both of which have experienced dramatic disruptions and setbacks. In these works, he applies vivid colours to xuan paper, which he tears up and mounts the fragments to a base layer, often leaving space between to create a pictorial field with the "cracks" that he feels are symbolic of life's journey.

Many of the artists also play on classical ink painting's strong connection with calligraphy, thereby reaffirming the importance of calligraphy in modern Chinese society. Wang Dongling (b. 1945) is a prominent modernist calligrapher whose works are influenced by his experience in the United States from 1989-1992. It was during this time that Wang began combining traditional Chinese aesthetics with Western modernist art. The Chinese characters in some of his works are indecipherable so that the paintings become almost closer to abstract painting rather than calligraphy. Wang is also concerned with the performative elements of traditional calligraphy, which places importance on the act of writing as an expression of the relationship between art and the body. He experiments with his fingertips, wrist, arms and whole body to produce his expressive ink works.

Wei Ligang's (b. 1964) works can be classified into three styles. The first style takes the form of modern calligraphy with a freehand foundation and adapts the traditional rules of calligraphy creation. The second style utilizes experimental ink applied in an abstract manner, mixed with new materials like lacquer and propylene, with the aim to build a bridge between Chinese and Western paintings. The third style, or "Wei's Works" as the artist calls them, are the overall result of his exploration into Chinese characters. Although his works display certain characteristics of Western modern art forms and ideas, their most vital features are again threefold: their unreserved focus on Chinese characters, the structure of the characters, and the significance placed on the strokes themselves as opposed to the representative aspect of the picture. In all his works we can sense these features, consciously or otherwise.

Qiu Zhenzhong (b. 1947) uses his unique style and subtle control of space, time and line to combine elements of traditional Chinese ink painting, calligraphy and modern art. Qiu's paintings aim to liberate traditional Chinese calligraphy and ink painting from its typical ideology, so as to transform its aesthetic function into something more authentic and absolute. Through his use of lyrical lines, form and composition, Qiu Zhenzhong reinterprets these iconic images from Western and Chinese culture using a traditional ink brush technique, and both poses and attempts to answer questions of tradition, art and interpretation.

Zheng Chongbin (b. 1961) divides his time between China and the USA. His work reflects influences from both cultures. Zheng mainly works in ink and wash and has been consistently involved with investigating the range of possibilities presented by the medium. He studied figurative painting before moving on to the exploration of non-representational forms, and later abstract expressionism. Zheng's abstract works result from an examination of space, in which vocabulary is often conditioned by scale and its tangibility, while aiming to produce a metaphysical dimension.

Lan Zhenghui (b. 1959) produces large-scale, monochromatic, abstract ink works. His monumental paintings and striking use of black ink reflect his constant pursuit of expression and feeling. His works are "bursts of emotion on paper" and are characterized by an abstract ink-splash style. Influenced by his background in science, Lan's aesthetic moves deftly between the realms of the rational and irrational. His brushstrokes are

created by systemic body movements, which contribute to the visual and spiritual impact of the works with the swelling of muscle, blood and physical power.

This exhibition demonstrates that through an exploration of China's past, these artists are able to make sense of the present: creating works which are relevant in today's society as well as remaining rooted in their culture's deep appreciation for artistic scholarship. It is this combination that has led to the popularity and re-evaluation of contemporary Chinese ink painting.

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