CONTEMPORARY INK PAINTING

Continuity, Innovation and Hybridisation

JOHN SEED

An Enduring Tradition

Ink painting, a primary form of artistic expression in China for over 1000 years, is experiencing a renaissance. Although deeply rooted in tradition, ink painting is also undergoing a transformation as it encounters and intersects with rapid social change and the influence of international Postmodernism. At the centre of this dynamism is American curator Dr Britta Erickson, who is providing much-needed connoisseurship and raising important questions. Beijing's Ink Studio, where Erickson serves as Artistic Director, has recently emerged as both a centre for the study of contemporary ink painting and also an exhibition space that is responding to, and documenting, recent developments in the field.

The tradition of Chinese ink painting, considered over time, has three key aspects that make it distinctive. First, it is an enduring "art language" that has served to transmit subtle and culturally revered forms and ideas. Ink painting is also—in terms of its tools—a very direct medium that remains highly responsive to the skill and vision of individual artists. Finally, and importantly, ink painting is an aesthetic vehicle for establishing philosophical relationships between artists, their works of art and the viewer. Long before Western modernists began to experiment with inner-directed imagery, Chinese literati painters created landscape paintings in ink that captured the inner spirit of their subject matter, rather than simply representing its outer appearance. This philosophical stance, a by-product of Daoist thought, is essential and precious to the ink painting tradition.

The idea of "spirit resonance", which gives traditional Chinese ink paintings their essential vitality, was one of the six principles of Chinese painting established by Xie He fifteen centuries before the American Abstract Expressionist Jackson Pollock told an interviewer, "I am nature". Although Pollock may not have recognised the Daoist nature of his comment, he had aligned himself with something that the elite landscape painters of the Song dynasty (960–1279) had certainly recognised: that painting could transmit hidden energies and interchanges. In its potential for generating personal philosophical dialogues with nature and with the Dao, Chinese ink painting remains one of civilisation's most deeply rooted and profound aesthetic practices.

In the early 20th century, the gradual influence of Western oil painting, with its emphasis on mimesis, began to shift and dilute some of the philosophical purity of ink painting. However, the greatest challenges to the Chinese tradition of ink painting came from within: beginning in the 1930s the political imperatives of the Maoist era demanded that art become widely comprehensible. Artists, who might have otherwise continued in the footsteps of the literati, instead produced narrative paintings that served the needs of the socialist revolution. Propaganda images that broadcast political values with immediacy functioned on the surface, abandoning painting's deeper personal and spiritual concerns. Quietly, however, in the background, an older generation of ink painters shepherded ink painting traditions and methods into the 20th century, but rarely had the opportunity to pass them on.

A Scholar's Journey

When Britta Erickson arrived in Beijing in 1985, she was a Stanford East Asian Studies Masters Degree candidate in search of contemporary Chinese art, travelling on a shoestring budget. Her advisor was the late art historian Michael Sullivan, the first Western scholar to focus on contemporary Chinese art and the intersection between Western and Eastern art. He had strongly encouraged Britta to make this trip, believing that she could connect with contemporary artists, as he had done half a century before. Still, several of her associates warned her that nothing was happening in contemporary art in China: her trip would be a waste of time. Obviously, that turned out not to be the case. Michael Sullivan introduced Erickson to some of his friends of the older generation, asking that they introduce her to the younger generation. Also, quite by chance, she met the painter/calligrapher Wang Dongling—who has over the years developed into China's greatest calligrapher in the traditional sense, as well as the most important and daring experimental calligrapher.

What surprised Erickson during this first trip was that there was little writing being done in English about China's new generation of artists. In the increasingly open atmosphere of Post-Mao China, where Deng Xiaoping was orchestrating a swing away from doctrinaire Marxism and loosening cultural strictures, she saw opportunities to document what was happening. Because there was little to no commercial interest in their work at the time, Erickson's connections with the artists she encountered were based on mutual interest in art and culture, reinforced by bonds of friendship.

A few years later, in Madison, Wisconsin, Erickson met Xu Bing—who had moved to the United States after the Tiananmen Square crackdown—and wrote the artist's first English language catalogue for a solo show held at the Elvehjem Museum in 1990–1991. Throughout the 1990s, while raising two young children, Erickson travelled whenever possible to China to meet new artists. She also met Chinese artists, who visited the US, and travelled to lead-

ing international exhibitions—including the 1996 *Shanghai Biennale* and the 1999 *Venice Biennale*—then returned home to do research and write for journals (including Chinese-art.com) or exhibition catalogues between trips. In 2001, Erickson was asked to curate "Word Play: Contemporary Art by Xu Bing" at the Smithsonian Institution's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington, DC. It was a momentous exhibition for both artist and curator, including an installation of the artist's acclaimed *Book from the Sky*, as well as many challenging new works originally created for this exhibition.

With her reputation established, Erickson soon found herself with more opportunities to curate. She was the sole curator of a thematic show, "On the Edge: Contemporary Chinese Artists Encounter the West", held at the Cantor Art Center of Stanford University. In 2006, Erickson was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to conduct research in Beijing on the Chinese contemporary art market and then was named a co-curator of the 2007 *Chengdu Biennial*, which was entirely devoted to ink painting. When Ink Studio was established by Craig Yee and Christopher Reynolds in 2013, Erickson was the natural choice to serve as Artistic Director.

Artists, Themes and Innovations

In 1985, the year when Britta Erickson first visited China, a cultural shift was in motion. A genuine avant-garde movement, now known as the '85 New Wave, evolved as a result of access to vast troves of newly available information about a vast range of styles, ranging from China's art of the past to Dada and International Postmodernism. Through the 1980s and 1990s more Chinese artists studied abroad, absorbing Western influence, and more information about Western ideas and media made its way into China, especially in the form of art catalogues. One trend, Political Pop, featured representational paintings—primarily in oil—that parodied Maoist propaganda art. Another later movement/exhibition, "Post-Sense and Sensibility", focused on individuality, on the limits of what is human and what is art, and included extreme experimentation with video and performance. These and other developments eroded and expanded traditional theories of art, enlarging the range of media used by a new generation of Chinese artists and connecting China with the broader world of art and culture.

Artists working in ink were certainly influenced by these developments. Among the most notable influences on their work were Abstract Expressionism (Action Painting), Conceptualism, Minimalism and Performance. The Postmodern importance of cultural context also became influential to several artists, offering them fresh intellectual and theoretical frameworks. Formal experimentation, including the addition of paints to ink, experiments with scale and the possibilities offered by new types of contemporary papers also brought hybridisation and change: many ink artists have now abandoned traditional scrolls in favour of modern framing and display techniques.

In China today, ink artists work in a situation that would have been impossible to imagine three decades ago. Connected to the world by international exhibitions and the internet, and supported by a vast array of public and private galleries, they are on the receiving end of tremendous attention and also under tremendous pressure. With every stroke of their brush and every wash of ink they remain connected to ancient China, but their art is now inextricably joined to a matrix of other cultural and economic forces. Only constant questioning, diligent study and true connoisseurship will enable Chinese ink painting to retain its sense of purpose and spiritual significance into, and beyond, the 21st century.

Key Artists

Bingyi

Bingyi (born 1975) studied biomedical and electronic engineering in the United States and earned a Ph.D. from Yale University in Art History and Archaeology (2005). She is a versatile and ambitious artist, who has recently gained attention for her large-scale installation and performance works. In 2013, she created an 1800 square-metre ink painting in public over a twelve-hour period in the centre of the Toronto City Hall. Bingyi also executes intimate small paintings that explore the microscopic origins of life, reflecting the gestural qualities of her personal calligraphy. She finds the forces of life in the small and the large.

Bingyi
Wanwu: Metamorphosis
2015
Ink on paper, 2200 x 260 cm x 2/6 pieces, installation view
Photographer: Jonathan Leijonhufvud. Image courtesy of Ink Studio

Portrait of Bingyi
Image courtesy of the artist

Wang Dongling

Wang Dongling (born 1945) graduated from the calligraphy department of Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now the National Academy of Fine Arts) in 1981. He is a highly respected Chinese calligrapher, who has received the unprecedented honour of three solo shows at the National Art Museum of China. He has gained recognition for his public performances of giant "mad" calligraphy and for experiments in which his calligraphies are captured on photographic paper. His work creates a bridge between the calligraphic traditions of China and Western modernist styles, including gestural abstraction and Minimalism. Wang Dongling's works have been characterised as liberating "calligraphic gesture, form and space from the bounds of text". Wang Dongling has recently retired as Director of the Modern Calligraphy Study Center—a unique centre created for him—at the China National Academy of Arts, Hangzhou.

Portrait of Wang Dongling
Photographer: Alan Yeung
Image courtesy of Ink Studio

Installation view of "Wang Dongling: The Origins of Abstraction" at Ink Studio
Photographer: Jonathan Leijonhufvud
Image courtesy of Ink Studio

Installation view of "Wang Dongling: The Origins of Abstraction" at Ink Studio
Photographer: Jonathan Leijonhufvud
Image courtesy of Ink Studio

Chen Haiyan

Chen Haiyan (born 1955) graduated in 1984 from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou. Her works—both in woodblock prints and in ink—illuminate dream images from her deep unconscious. Emotionally direct and animated by the artist's bold formal approach, Chen's works form a conversation between the expressive qualities of Western Modernism and traditional Chinese aesthetics. Her art evokes a broad emotional range, from horror to wonder. While her paintings make striking use of colour, her monochrome woodcuts strikingly display the strength of her knife work, as it follows her preliminary brush painting.

Portrait of Chen Haiyan
Image courtesy of the artist

Chen Haiyan
The Black Cat and I
2004
Ink and colour on xuan paper, 364 x 146 cm
Image courtesy of Ink Studio and the artist

Installation view of "Chen Haiyan: Carving the Unconscious" at Ink Studio
Photographer: Jonathan Leijonhufvud
Image courtesy of Ink Studio

Zheng Chongbin

After graduating from the Department of Chinese Painting at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, Hangzhou, Zheng Chongbin (born 1961) stayed on as a faculty member for four years. In 1989, after a solo exhibition at the Shanghai Art Museum, he was awarded an international fellowship at the San Francisco Art Institute, where he earned his Master of Fine Arts in 1991. He now lives and works in both California and Shanghai, creating large-scale works that have spiritual and philosophical aspects, embodying Daoist energies and "resonance". His works often combine ink and acrylic media, as well as installations and video pieces. He has been exploring the possibilities of ink as a material, allowing the material to control the process. In addition, as an international conceptual, abstract, and light and space artist, he is interested in how his works interact with light, with space, and with the human audience.

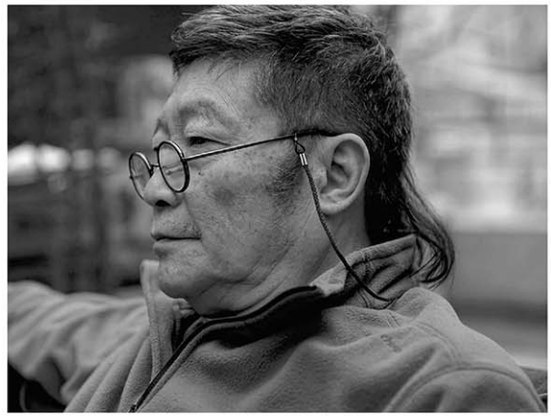
Zheng Chongbin
Wall of Skies
2015
Light and space installation, installation view
Photographer: Jonathan Leijonhufvud
Image courtesy of Ink Studio

Portrait of Zheng Chongbin
Photographer: Kaz Tsuruta
Image courtesy of the artist

Zheng Chongbin
Unfolding Landscape
2015
Ink and acrylic on
xuan paper,
167.6 x 269.2 cm
Photographer: Kaz Tsuruta
Image courtesy of
Ink Studio and the artist

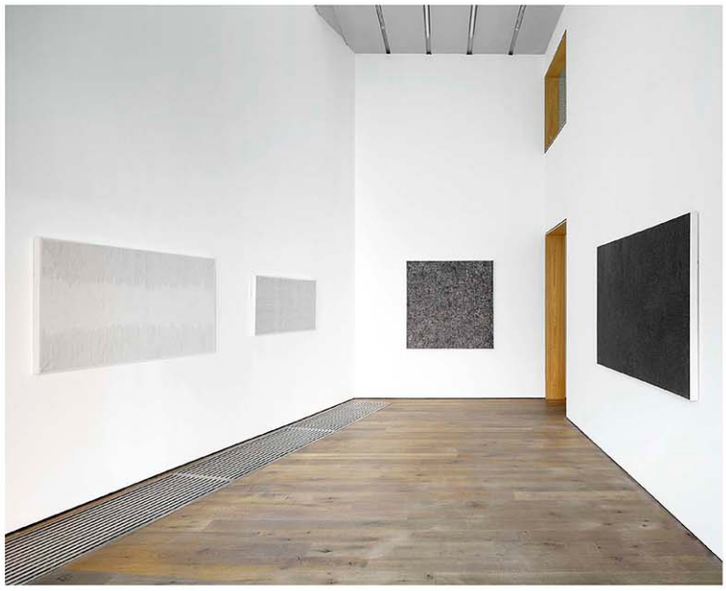
Li Huasheng

Li Huasheng (born 1944) is a classically-trained painter who became internationally known for his ink landscapes of Sichuan. After visiting numerons museums during a trip to the United States, he returned to China convinced that what he had been doing was not art. He took a long break from painting. By 1998, he had found his way. In attempting to paint the landscape of Tibet, he found the Buddhist chanting to be the dominant element of the landscape. He painted this chanting as lines. The lines overlapped in grids. The process became meditative, as the lines recorded the passing of each day, capturing the nuances and fluctuations in the artist's "qi", the vital energy of his body and mind.



Portrait of Li Huasheng
Image courtesy of the artist

Installation view of "Li Huasheng: Process, Mind and Landscape" at Ink Studio
Photographer: Jonathan Leijonhufvud
Image courtesy of Ink Studio



Installation view of "Li Huasheng: Process, Mind and Landscape" at Ink Studio
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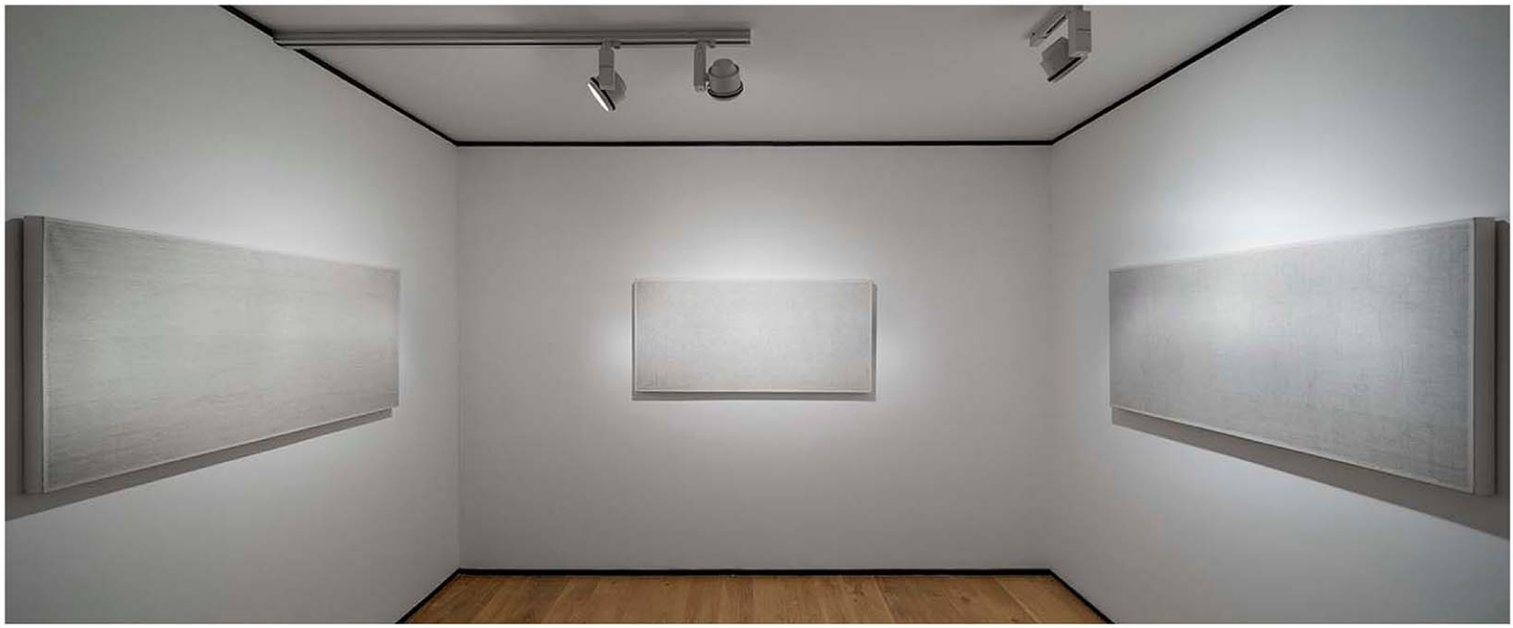
Image courtesy of Ink Studio



Installation view of "Li Huasheng: Process, Mind and Landscape" at Ink Studio
Photographer: Jonathan Leijonhufvud
Image courtesy of Ink Studio

Li Huasheng
1534
2015
Ink on paper, 74 x 366 cm
Photographer: Jonathan Leijonhufvud
Image courtesy of Ink Studio

An Interview with Britta Erickson

JOHN SEED—Can you tell me how Ink Studio came to be founded?

BRITTA ERICKSON—In the mid-1980s, I worked for three years for Mr Jung Ying Tsao, a collector of extraordinary Chinese paintings. He taught me connoisseurship by showing me Ming and Qing dynasty paintings and giving me some direction in how to understand them, how to look at them, how to view individual brushstrokes, and so on. Then he would send me off to another room to look at the painting by myself for a while. This was an exceedingly rare opportunity. Hardly anyone gets to learn connoisseurship in this traditional and most effective way, because most great paintings are now in museums where you can't sit with them and study them for hours.

In the 1990s, Craig Yee and Christopher Reynolds came to know Mr Tsao too, and they also learned from him. After many years, Mr Tsao told them that if they ever wanted to do something with contemporary Chinese art, they should look to me, have me be involved. Thus, the three of us met through Mr Tsao, and his mentorship has given all of us a sophisticated understanding of traditional Chinese painting. Craig and Chris discussed the idea of founding a gallery, and then asked me if I would come on board as the gallery's Artistic Director, curate the exhibitions, and oversee the production of the books we would produce.

JS—It sounds like the vision of Ink Studio was broad and ambitious. What are some of the important aspects of that vision?

BE—We decided early on to produce serious books rather than exhibition catalogues: there is a real dearth of serious and accessible scholarship in this field. Basically, Craig and Chris proposed to create Ink Studio as a platform for me to curate shows, produce books and make films. And we planned to do all this to a very high standard: the gallery space was remodelled beautifully—by a person who worked as a set designer for *Life of Pi*—with wooden floors, which I don't think I've seen in any other Beijing gallery.

We have a big staff, including four young people with art history backgrounds doing research: each artist we exhibit gets assigned a researcher who gathers information,

Portrait of Britta Erickson
Ink Studio's Artistic Director

including putting together what is usually the first accurate Curriculum Vitae they've ever had. We produce videos showing each artist's process, which we post along with other educational videos and texts on the gallery website, www.inkstudio.com.cn. Because our exhibitions are produced to such exacting standards, we can only do four per year, which is very few for a commercial gallery. They are basically museum quality shows.

JS—What are some of the overlaps and connections between contemporary ink painting and contemporary abstraction in the West?

BE—In the mid-20th century, East Asian philosophy was taken up by notable Western artists, including some who painted abstractions. That, in turn, influenced a new generation of artists in China. When founding the gallery, we decided to focus on art at the very tiny intersection between ink painting that reads well by the strict traditional standards, with which the three of us were familiar, and international contemporary art practice. We also decided to be as inclusive as possible, bringing in work that we felt had an ink aesthetic, as well as unconventional art created using ink.

JS—As a curator, is ink painting your sole interest?

BE—I was, and still am, interested in all media—I only

care that a work of art is superlative. I am focusing on ink right now because I feel that at the moment there is a great deal of interest in ink, with more and more exhibitions, and more artists taking up ink, but I can see that ink is not well understood. I am afraid that if people don't learn what is crucial to ink painting and how to judge brushwork and composition, they will be content with looking at mediocre art, and this moment for ink will disappear. People need to look at the very best ink art, and know how to judge its quality. Then ink can attain the position it deserves in the world of art.

JS—What have been a few of the highlights of your career as a curator of contemporary Chinese ink painting?

BE—I was thrilled to curate Xu Bing's very important solo show at the Sackler Gallery. The Freer/Sackler is the nation's Asian art museum, and the show was momentous because it was the first time they had held a major exhibition for a living artist! They gave me basically the entire museum, and Bing created many new works that turned out to be very important in his career.

Co-curating the 2007 *Chengdu Biennial* was an eye-opener—seeing what goes on in producing a major show in China, from the inside. And I curated a really lovely thematic show, "On the Edge: Contemporary Chinese Artists Encounter the West", for the Cantor Art Center at Stanford. That show won an award, plus the really fun part was that I had a different artist come every two weeks to create a new work of art, so I got to hang out with them in a sort of peaceful setting.

Curating shows for Ink Studio I have discovered that my concept for at least half of the shows is turning around one very meaningful thing: providing a place for mid-career artists to take the next significant, daring step. Some of them are showing a body of work they have never shown anywhere, and others are realising they are tired of what they have been (very successfully) doing and are really happy to have a place to make that jump. This makes me feel what I am doing is worthwhile. Wang Dongling had his first solo show in Beijing of his pure abstractions at Ink Studio. At the end of May, Li Jin unveiled a new stage in his career, stripping back the colour for which he has been known, to reveal a more profound and technically sophisticated new body of work. Zheng Chongbin has progressed in his expressions of light and space, bringing them into installation and film. This mid-career gear change is key to so many artists' careers, and I am proud to help shepherd this into existence.

JS—How have Chinese collectors and members of the Chinese public responded to Ink Studio and its programmes?

BE—Ink Studio has a very good social media following, and some major Chinese collectors are now clients of Ink Studio: it's all growing at a good pace. Sometimes, members of the press express some astonishment that three Americans have opened an ink art gallery in Beijing, since some people believe that only Chinese people can understand Chinese ink painting. But then they are pretty amazed when they hear one of us talking about some very deep or arcane aspect of ink painting, something that probably even they didn't know.

Installation view of "Ink and the Body"
at Ink Studio
Photographer: Jonathan Leijonhufvud
Image courtesy of Ink Studio

Installation view of "Ink and the Body"
at Ink Studio
Photographer: Jonathan Leijonhufvud
Image courtesy of Ink Studio

JS—What do you see in the future for Ink Studio?

BE—Important museums and collectors are realising that Ink Studio is the gallery that is really serious and discerning about ink art. Museums are some of the gallery's biggest clients. We were just at Art Basel Hong Kong. We were probably the youngest gallery there, but Artsy ranked our booth as one of the top twenty among over 200 participating galleries.

Because I have longstanding friendships with most of the artists, some reaching back to 1985—when I met Wang Dongling, China's top calligrapher—the artists know I understand their work, so they trust me and like to work with me. Some of them have never really worked regularly with a gallery before, because there wasn't one that would take them seriously and protect their interests.