

ASIAN ART NEWS

HK\$65/US\$8.50/
C\$8.50/€6/UK£4.50

VOLUME 21 NUMBER 6 NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2011

ZHANG YU



Istanbul Biennial * South Australian
Living Artists Festival * Jakkai Siributr
* Guan Wei * Amrit and Rabindra
Singh * Heri Dono * Reviews * Books



In A Realm Of One's Own

The Chinese ink painter Zhang Yu has long struggled with ink painting from which his art emerges. While his painting and ideas are steeped in Chinese

innovations while keeping an eye on enlarging the great tradition and culture culture, they also speak vigorously across art's international borders.

By Ian Findlay

The challenge for contemporary Chinese ink painters is to find a voice that is unique within the outstanding traditions that have emerged through the millennia. For the most innovative and experimental artists, however, it must be of a form and content that speaks not only to the concerns of the intellectual community for whom tradition is culturally paramount but it must also speak to the ordinary world in which traditions germinate and are spread. New ink art in the 21st century must have everyday cultural value or it will wither and die.

The outstanding, quietly dramatic installations and *Fingerprint* paintings of Beijing-based Zhang Yu, of the past decade, mark him as one of the finest exponents of contemporary ink painting, for he knows the provocations and difficulties of cultural change only too well. He understands, too, the damage done by those who speak in clichés about experimenting with ink tradition. For Zhang Yu, understanding the spiritual aspects of art and culture and technical precision are essential to his own being and the success of his art. Clichés, he notes, discourage young artists from taking risks, which, in turn, encourages artists to pander to the marketplace without a thought of the future and something new.

"I hope that we can develop a new contemporary Chinese ink art from our own traditional culture but it must not be so influenced by Western art. This issue

is deeply related to our philosophy, religion, and culture. That Chinese traditional art has a long history and has influenced so many others in Asia gives us hope for the future.

"But there are problems now for, as I see it, contemporary Chinese art is a bit confused in its direction. I think that artists don't really consider art itself but are more concerned about society's problems. And much of what we see as so-called contemporary Chinese art is really copied from Western contemporary art, as that was our influences in the 1980s and 1990s. The expression of society's problems is copied from the West. In China I believe that artists ignore basic traditional cultural issues. We have seen this in the past few years with movements like Political Pop, Cartoons, and Cynical Realism."¹

Unlike many of his contemporaries Zhang Yu was neither raised nor educated within the traditions of ink painting so

he has not been entirely constrained by the conservative art-thinking of many traditionalist teachers about the past and on what ink painting should be. Born in 1959 in Tianjin, Zhang was educated at the Tianjin Academy of Arts and Crafts from which he graduated in 1988. But before he began at the Academy, he had already had a wealth of experience in publishing in Tianjin that has stood him in good stead, not the least of which was the knowledge that he gained across a wide range of media.

"When I was working in Yang Liu Qing publishing house as an editor in Tianjin for three years," Zhang recalls, "the important things were the experience of traditional ink and wash, and traditional woodblock printing. These were important for me before I started studying in Tianjin in 1984. By the time I began, I had had good hands-on practical experience and my own attitude to my work. Although I had already worked, I wanted the diploma, which I achieved in environmental design.

When I look back, I realize that the teaching was really basic theory but I had my own theories that had come from experience. I can't say that my years at art school were so important, but my work experience certainly was."

Zhang's current art and spiritual concerns have emerged slowly within his *oeuvre* over the past 25 years. This is something that many people are unaware of as they look at Zhang's powerful achievement today. His art—as well as himself—has



Zhang Yu, *Fan Painting series - A Sacred Place*, 1987, ink and color on paper, 42 x 80 cm.



Above left: Zhang Yu, *Portrait Series - Shout*, 1989, ink and color on paper, 56 x 58 cm.



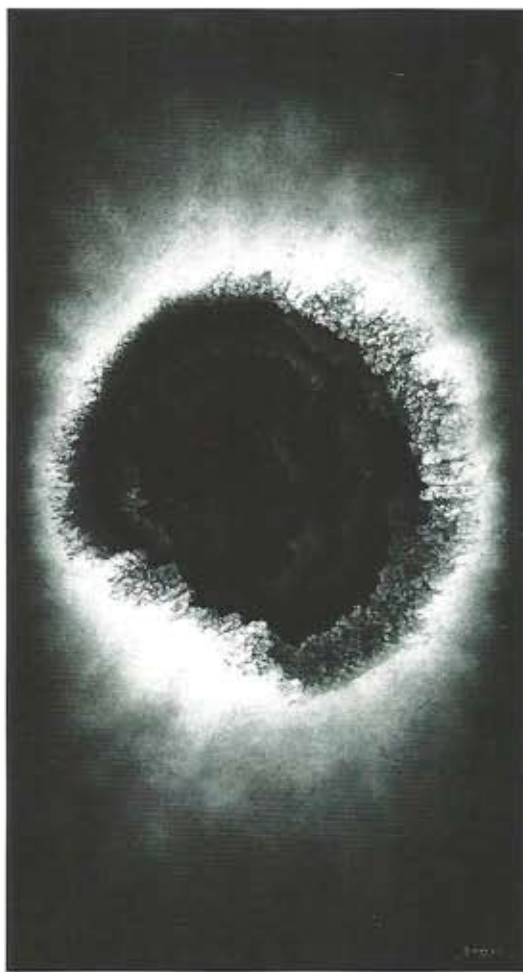
Above right: Zhang Yu, *Capriccio Chapter 6, Repentment*, 1993, ink and color on paper, 70 x 70 cm.

Previous pages: Zhang Yu, *Fingerprint*, installation at Kuandu Museum of Fine Arts, Taipei, 2009, ink and paper, 3,000 x 110 x 49 cm. All images: Courtesy of the Artist and Da Xiang Art Space, Taichung, Taiwan.

undergone quite radical visual and narrative changes but, when one looks closely at his *oeuvre*, one realizes that the spirit in which he moves today was already present in his various ink series—*Fan Painting*, *Portrait*, *Capriccio*, *Soul of Ink*, *Ink Image*, and *Divine Light*—from the late 1980s through to the beginning of the new millennium. In these series Zhang's narrative was initially a mix of the figurative and the abstract in which he references art of both the West and the East, where one sees a significant Buddhist and Tibetan influence in content and structure.

In his fan painting entitled *A Sacred Place* (1987) the narrative is a figure before a shrine within an abstract landscape. There is a meditative stillness in this work that is developed further in other series. One sees it in his later paintings such as *Portrait Series – Shout* (1989), in which the meditating figure appears to be floating in a cloud, *Divine Light No.52: The Floating Incomplete Circle* (1997), and *Capriccio Chapter 6: Repentment* (1993), in which the figure is slowly vanishing: here, even this early, one sees in the background spots which hint of the fingerprints Zhang develops a decade later.

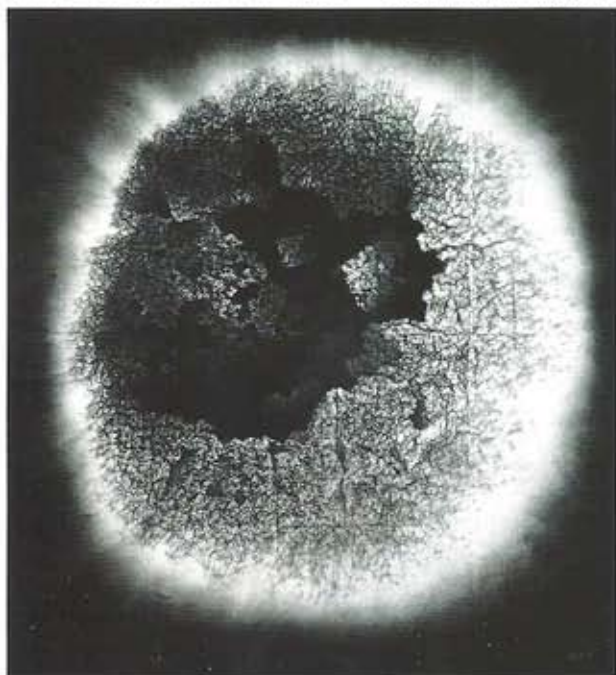
As he has moved through each series in search of a new



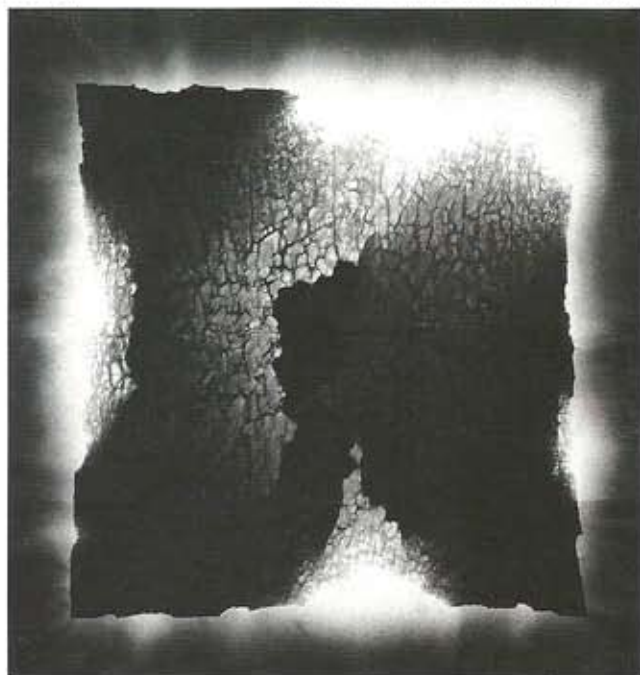
Zhang Yu, *Divine Light No.52: The Floating Incomplete Circle*, 1997, ink on paper, 200 x 100 cm.

aesthetic, Zhang never entirely discards his earliest influences, among which are those of Shi Tao, Bada Shanren, Zhao Mengfu, and Huang Binhong. "Their paintings, their marks, their strokes, their layers, their content, and their composition show that there is a relationship with an artist's personal character," says Zhang. "In the 1980s, I had an experience with wood and stone carving and this has stayed with me. Of course, there are also elements like poetry. I would say that some of my recent paintings are like poems that have been stripped to the essence. For me stone carving is like a printed signature just like a finger is a signature, an identity, which has a direct relationship with the artist and tradition, which includes culture, technology, and language."

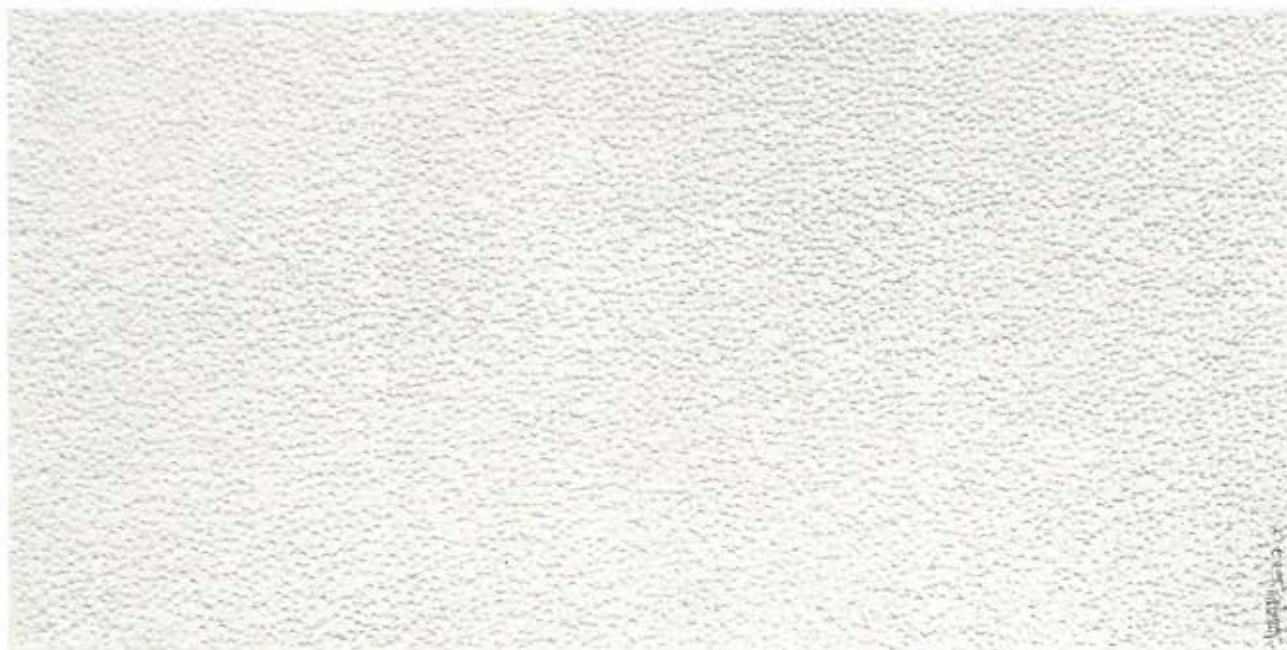
Zhang is never certain where his art represents his character. From the beginning of his career, however, he has been careful in the layering of his art, which he says alludes to something of his spirit. "The most important thing is my expression of myself, which is complex because it is not one thing. If I want to achieve a rich work, then I have to express many parts of myself but one has to simplify the complex so that others might read it. Today I think that my work is about the spirit, even the spiritual, but before the 1990s my work was more about personal emotion. You can see this in my *Portrait*



Zhang Yu, *Divine Light No.46: The Floating Incomplete Circle*, 1996, ink on paper, 200 x 200 cm. Collection of Guangdong Museum of Art.



Zhang Yu, *Divine Light No.63: The Suspended Broken Square*, 2000, ink on paper, 99 x 90 cm.



Zhang Yu, *Fingerprint - 2007.8-3*, 2007, water and paper, 68 x 136 cm.

series, which I made between 1987 and 1991. This series has a relationship with my *Fan Painting* series that I had begun in 1984. These two series are based on personal experiences and emotions.

"It wasn't difficult for me to paint my experience or my emotions. I felt it was natural. I had a broad range of experience, which made it easier for me. The ending of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 had a great effect on me. Like other artists I could begin to speak the truth and speak about true feelings, which in early years was a semi-abstract narrative."

Being able to speak the truth turned quickly into painting a truth and then boldly into breaking the rules of painting, which had been forbidden by China's cultural commissars from 1949 onwards. For Zhang and his generation there was no going back. Painting the truth meant leaving socialist realism and its cousins by the wayside to embark on the tumultuous road of self-discovery and enlightenment, whether through abstract or new figurative art through oil on canvas or ink and wash.

In the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s formerly closed creative doors were being broken open. Zhang expressed his cultural liberation through various series of paintings that defined his spiritual world as never before. By the mid-1990s, Zhang's art had been variously figurative,

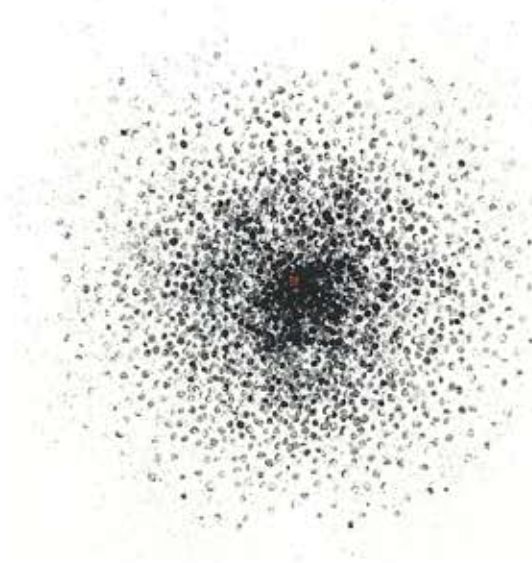
surrealist, abstract, and non-objective. Each new series added a line on his artistic and imaginative map. As he says, "My thoughts on the world and myself were opening up, and I was trying to play with my personal emotions and experiences and to look at the bigger picture of life."

Defining the "bigger picture" was not easy but it did result in his powerful ink-and-wash series entitled *Divine Light* series. Works from this series such as *Divine Light No.52* (1997), *Divine Light No.63* (2000), and *Divine Light No.64* (2000) amply reflect Zhang's changed aesthetic and emotional experimentation. In these ink-on-rice-paper works there is both cosmic tension and liberating light: together these

stand as a metaphor for the artist's own changing artistic personality. It may have taken Zhang a decade to reach this point of personal and artistic liberation with his *Divine Light* series, but it was not an end to his development; rather it signaled a new beginning with new challenges from which emerged his *Fingerprint* series of paintings and installations. These obsessive works remind one of the dot paintings made by Indigenous Australian artists. The dots of the *Fingerprint* series are often of varying red, most notably pink, white, and grey hues and placement has something of the aesthetic complexity of the Chinese board game *weiqi* [known to most people in the West as *go* or *igo* in Japanese].

Where his contemporary Nan Qi uses his studied, brushed dot in an organized linear manner, Zhang's dots are made by a finger dipped in ink and the placement is random, yet one senses that it is ordered by an obsessive quality in his character.

The aesthetic and spiritual elements of the *Fingerprint* series were not entirely new to Zhang as he had, in his early tacit-style painting *Fingerprint - 1991: 2-1*, already begun to work with his fingers. In 1991, however, this kind of work was considered by many to be too radical. As Zhang says, "In 1991, my work became minimalist for a year. Not many people understood or accepted the early *Fingerprint* series because there was too big a gap between these works and traditional ink painting. People



Zhang Yu, *Fingerprint - 1991.2-1*, 1991, ink on paper, 68 x 68 cm. Private collection, England.

thought this series was abstract. I don't think this series is simple abstraction.

"At that time, critics couldn't understand this series from a cultural level, but only on a level of form. The vocabulary of Chinese art education is Western and so it limits the way in which the critics express themselves. But after the 1991 experiment, my work became not only more personal but also more like the end of life and how we face death and how people will develop. I think the reality behind such issues is people's spirit and how it is nurtured."

In the decade from 1994 to 2003, Zhang painted almost 100 first-rate works for his *Divine Light* series, a stunning achievement by any art standard and a significant step in his development of fresh cultural criteria to challenge those who simply demand aesthetic change from stagnant tradition and question those for whom theory and practice will always be separated by intellectual arrogance. The *Divine Light* series showed that theory and practice often do exist harmoniously, that well-considered ink wash seduces as readily as bold brushstrokes, that in the play of light and shadow there are unsolvable mysteries that should remain so; and that the imagined cosmos and its energies can be harnessed by an ink poet to be gazed upon as naturally as looking at a landscape.

"This series seems to be simple, but it is complex and rich, in both the visual language and the form. This series has no relationship with the basic traditional brushstroke. I don't use the traditional brushstroke. In this work I used layering, but my own way of layering is done in a random and gradual abstract form and so my own language has emerged. These forms really represent our earth's environment and not my feeling."

With the *Fingerprint* series, begun at the beginning of the 21st century, Zhang cast aside painstaking layering, removing



Zhang Yu, *Fingerprint - 2008.9-2*, 2008, ink on paper, 47 x 73 cm.

any direct link to tradition. Here there is no sweeping gesture: there is only the gesture of a poet writing in miniature forms. Black ink has given way to red pigment, white, or grey, the seduction of the simple. Where there was once bold ink wash, there is now only a tiny Zen circle, sometimes fat, but often fading as at dusk; the cosmos of the fingertip, one might say. The importance of the finger, Zhang says, is no mystery: "I am returning to one. To Zen and Dao culture." The finger paintings have moved from two-dimensional to dramatic three-dimensional installation works that further enhance Zen and Daoist cultural aspects of Zhang's art.

The repetitious nature of his art aligns Zhang with a wide range of artists from many cultures. Repetition is extremely effective in creating a sense of tranquility, of mesmerizing the imagination, of alerting the eye to chaos without instilling fear in the observer. His fingerprint becomes an individual mark of self and then collectively becomes an odd record of the artist's emotional and psychological state as he obsessively covers the paper's surface.

Where the brush lends a distance between the painter and the paper, Zhang's use of his right index finger with which to 'paint' places him in immediate contact with his medium, which becomes an extension of the artist himself. And as painting with the finger is so personal, it offered Zhang a few challenges, the most difficult, according to the artist, "was on the one hand keeping in touch with ink tradition and on the other hand creating something new. If you want to be an artist, you have to create something new always."

The content of the *Fingerprint* series suggests Buddhist serenity, a spiritual stillness that immediately attracts. The works in the series may be seen as minimalist in the Western canon, but the Chinese scholar Gao Minglu has called this work Maximalist. As he notes in his catalogue essay for Zhang Yu's show at Goedhuis Contemporary, New York, (February 23 - March 12, 2007), "Chinese Maximalism' does not reject the elements of subject and spirituality. On the contrary, it emphasizes the spiritual experience of the artist in the process of the creation as a self-contemplation outside and beyond the artwork itself."

Zhang Yu has really been able to develop a fresh vision for ink painting and its potential in the digital era, and he is able to articulate it clearly. The *Fingerprint* series is ongoing and, as Zhang moves on, one senses that his art will become even more stripped down, more spiritual and silent. Δ

Note:

1. Unless otherwise stated all of the Zhang Yu quotations are taken from an interview with the author in Beijing, October 19, 2011. The author would like to thank Ms. Duan Lian for her help with interpreting in Beijing, and Da Xiang Art Space in Taichung for arranging the interview.



Zhang Yu, *Fingerprint - A Book*, 2007, plant pigment and paper.