

# Summoning Memories: Art Beyond Chinese Traditions

SUSAN L. BENINGSON



1 View of Gallery Two, “Ink Alchemy: Beyond the Brush”. Centre: Bingyi (born 1975, lives and works in Los Angeles and Beijing), *Can the Eyes Sing? The Bodies of the Sacred Mountains*, 2021, ink on paper. Courtesy of the artist and INKstudio

“SUMMONING MEMORIES: Art Beyond Chinese Traditions”, on view at the Asia Society Texas Center in Houston, highlights works by thirty-two contemporary artists of Chinese descent, who reinterpret traditions in dynamic and innovative ways (1). Across painting, sculpture and photography, these sixty works by established and emerging artists of different generations and backgrounds use experimentation to draw on both Eastern and Western art-making practices and materials. The artists featured in this exhibition push boundaries, manipulating traditional materials and developing unique fabrication processes, that result in experimental ink painting, calligraphy and deconstructed language, on both real and imaginary landscapes, cityscapes and celestial patterns. While landscapes borrow from time-honoured imagery, the artists subvert their visual language and meaning, responding to our present-day concerns about urbanisation, the fragmentation of landscapes created by the degradation of the environment and the rapid pace of China’s modernisation, among other urgent issues. Ultimately, these artists summon memories of the past to move beyond its spectre, forging new artistic ground on which to build.

The five galleries are loosely divided into conversations with different cultural and historical traditions or artistic precedents. In each gallery, memory becomes the organising principle for the themes, “Evoking the Past: People and



2 Zhang Hongtu (born 1943, lives in New York City), *Zodiac Figures*, 2002, earthenware with three-colour (*sancai*) glaze. Courtesy of the artist

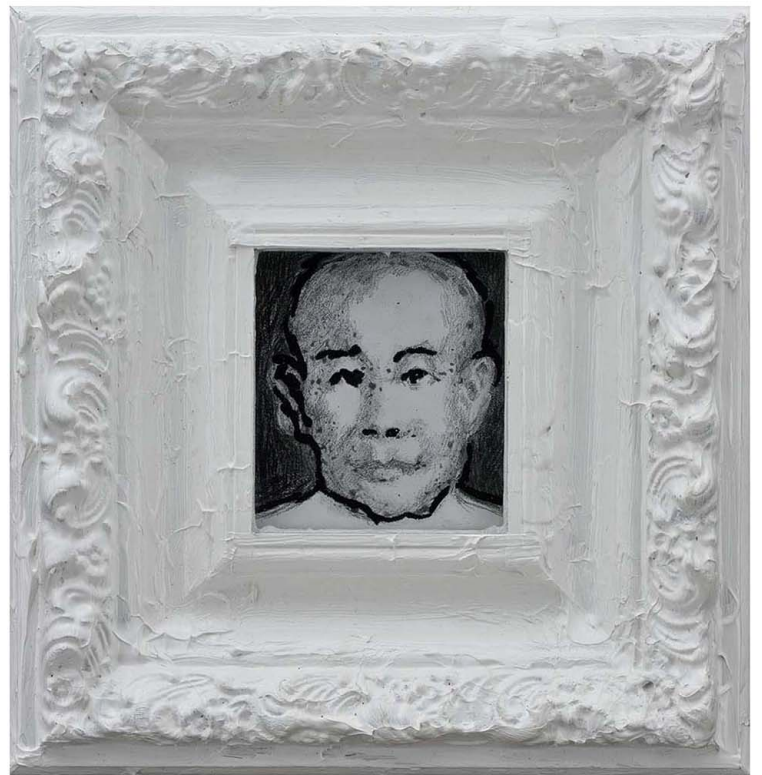
Places”, “Ink Alchemy: Beyond the Brush”, “Landscapes, Cityscapes: Lost and Haunted”, “Language and Scholarly Traditions: Remembered and Reinvented” and “Storytelling: Word and Image”. This exhibition is a series of reflections on how art is simultaneously the vehicle, preserver, creator and even betrayer of memories, both personal and historical.



3 Yang Yongliang (born 1980, lives in New York City and Shanghai), *Imagined Landscape, Rabbit*, 2022, giclée print on fine art paper. Courtesy of the artist



4 From left: Sun Xun (born 1980, lives in Beijing), *The Time Vivarium-11*, 2014, acrylic and ink on paper mounted to aluminum. Pizzuti Collection; Sun Xun, *The Time Vivarium-16*, 2014, acrylic and ink on paper mounted to aluminum. Pizzuti Collection; Zheng Lu (born 1978, lives in Beijing), *Water in Dripping – You*, 2016, stainless steel. Courtesy of the artist and Sundaram Tagore Gallery



5 Liu Wei (born 1965, lives in Beijing), *180 Faces*, 2017–2018, mixed media. Courtesy the artist and Sean Kelly

More than 1400 people visited the exhibition during the first day of the soft opening during Asia Society’s Lunar New Year festivities in late January 2023. There are two works to celebrate the Year of the Rabbit. The first is a group of twelve *Zodiac Figures* by Zhang Hongtu, the Chinese-American artist, combining the more than 1000 year old Tang dynasty (618–907) ceramic tradition of the three-colour (*sancai*) glaze with the well-known hands-behind-the-back pose and outfit of popular ceramic figures of the Communist leader, Mao Zedong (1893–1976), collected in the 1950s and 1960s (2). Zhang has written that when he created the *Zodiac Figures*, he intended to “create new images that have connections which transcend the [original] meaning of the twelve animals. This strange mixture parallels the current situation in China: a mixture of old and new, East and West.” In the second work, Yang Yongliang, the artist, created a new commission, *Imagined Landscape, Rabbit*, specifically for this exhibition in conjunction with the author, to celebrate the Lunar New Year (3). Yang’s best-known works, including his *Phantom Landscape* series also on view in the exhibition, are monochromatic visions evoking the misty landscapes of earlier Song dynasty (960–1279) paintings, with cloudy peaks shrouded in mist (16). Upon closer inspection, the digital dystopia he creates are instead comprised of giant cranes, electrical pylons and skyscrapers, revealing the upheaval and destruction of traditional cityscapes, particularly in Shanghai where he lived at the time. Yang’s latest series of *Imagined Landscapes* are the first time he has introduced colour into his digital images. This transformation of his work began during the Covid lockdown spent in New York City when his meditations on the pandemic led to experimentations with this new style and colour palette. Although mountains are still created by high-rise towers and electrical pylons, these new visions depict landscapes more serene and surrounded by

blue sky and rushing streams, rather than tsunamis of destruction. The pine tree, standing amongst the rocks, alludes to the traditional motif in Chinese painting of the Confucian scholar, who endures hardship, yet survives in difficult times; the lower branches are backlit by mist while the treetops still maintain their leaves. In the bottom right corner of the image, three playful rabbits, nestled by the shore, contemplate the new year.

### Evoking the Past: People and Places

Artist Sun Xun has written in conjunction with his *Time Vivarium* series that, “history is a tool that can be manipu-



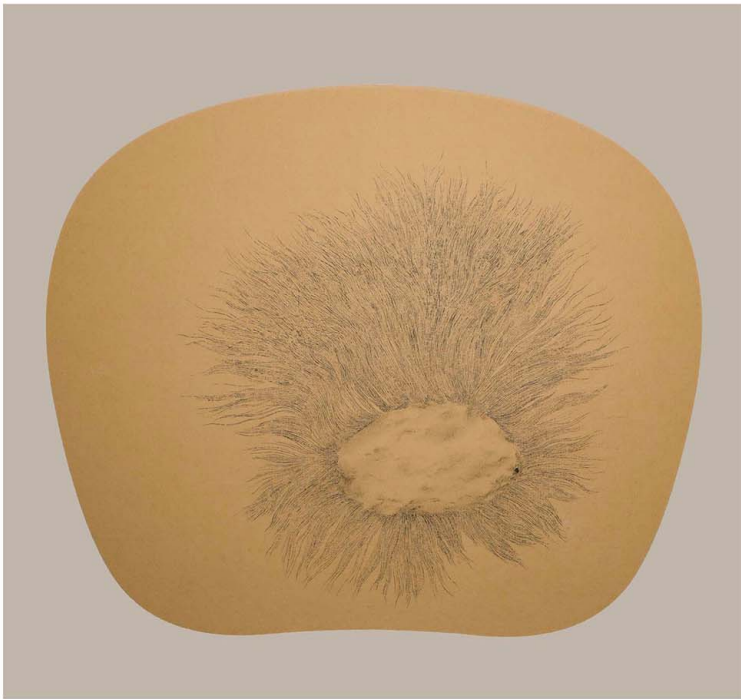
6 Zheng Chongbin (born 1961, lives in San Francisco), *New Six Canons (Xin Liufa)*, 2012, set of six panels, ink and acrylic on *xuan* paper. Collection of JYCO. LLC. Photo by Kaz Tsurut.

lated by either the government, or an artist, to serve their own goals” (4).<sup>1</sup> This can be extended to the political history of places like the Forbidden City or personal memories from the trajectory of one’s own life, where past reality may be subverted to create new political or personal meaning. This gallery includes an early folding album by Liu Wei, *Untitled No. 6 “Flower”* (2003), in which the artist critiques the people and precedents of the art historical establishment in the context of what he describes as his “messy sex diaries”. This contrasts with his more recent work, *180 Faces* (2019) (5). Some images look like sepia photographs of a different century, while others stare at you with a piercing gaze through a bulls-eye of purposely broken glass. Liu means for these faces “not to be read as portraits of ‘real people’ but rather as expressions of his own subconscious”. Zheng Lu, the Beijing-based artist, has created a gravity-defying sculpture composed of thousands of individual Chinese characters forming the text to the poem, *Playing with Water (Wan Zhi Shui)*, by Bai Juyi (772–846), the famous Tang dynasty poet (4). The artist created this stainless-steel sculpture starting with a plaster base, then laser cut the characters of the ancient poem into the metal and, in a technique similar to linking chain-mail, used heat to connect the characters so he could shape them to the support base. The waves of the resulting metal sculpture flow like the elegant words of the poem, creating a private space for the viewer like the lyrical words that inspired it, and alluding to the Tang and Song dynasty gardens at its philosophical foundation that provided a sanctuary for self-cultivation.

In his monumental work, the *New Six Canons (Xin Liufa)*,

Zheng Chongbin not only creates an artistic tour de force combining traditional ink painting techniques with Western materials, but also reinterprets the most fundamental work in the Chinese art historical canon (6). The *Six Canons of Chinese Painting* by Xie He, the art historian (active 479–502), have been seen as the essential criteria for judging Chinese ink painting since the 5th century. The painting is organised in six panels, each representing one of the canons, including *qiyun shendong*, which Zheng translates as “vital resonance”, pointing to the importance of the life force of *qi* not only animating the universe, but providing the vital life essence and spirit energy in the painting. Zheng has explored the intersections of the Chinese ink painting tradition and Western abstraction using materials from both, mixing black ink with white acrylic to create spontaneous and accidental effects. Zheng says that when he creates a new work, he both “interacts with *qi* and creates *qi*. The visitor also interacts with *qi* when they view the painting”, imbuing it with the more personal meaning of their own life experiences. He continues that the word, *qi*, is itself often overused and that the word “trace” might be more accurate. When he creates a painting, “you don’t

<sup>1</sup>For more on Sun Xun and the *Time Vivarium* series, refer to Susan L. Beningson, “Contemporary Chinese Art at the Brooklyn Museum (Part Two)”, in the Brooklyn Museum issue of *Arts of Asia*, Vol. 50, no. 2, 2020, pp. 77–91. Also see Susan L. Beningson, “We The People: Xu Bing and Sun Xun Respond to the Declaration of Independence”, in *We Do Not Dream Along, Asia Society Triennial, 2020–2021*, eds Michelle Yun Mapplethorpe and Boon Hui Tan. Milan: Asia Society and Skira Publishers, 2021, pp. 106–109, 116–123.



7 Bingyi, *Fairy of Hairy Rocks*, 2019–2020, ink on paper. Private Collection, New York. Photo courtesy of the artist



8 Zhang Jian-Jun (born 1955, lives in Venice Beach, California and Shanghai), *Rubbing Planet in Shui-mo Space*, 2022, Chinese ink, oil paint, acrylic, rice paper on canvas. Courtesy of the artist

know what will happen to the materials until you see it, like the contrails from a plane in the sky, that then disappear into the clouds”. He continues that the *xuan* paper he uses “is like a membrane. Water touches it, and it can become translucent or transparent. Once water touches *xuan* paper, it becomes alive; the back of the paper can become the front of the paper. It is a causal reaction and then the painting becomes not a two-dimensional flat surface, but a three-dimensional sculpture.”<sup>2</sup> He calls this “material as agent... Water flowing over and through a surface is like the interactions between solid and fluid forms. In my work, I am not trying to control the water, but to find its flow, with its own meaning.” The endurance and continued resiliency of these conversations with earlier traditions are at the heart of these art works and this exhibition.

### **Ink Alchemy: Beyond the Brush**

Chinese ink landscape paintings have rarely been about depicting craggy mountain ranges with jugged peaks or numinous scenery shrouded in mist. Instead, landscapes are a spiritual environment, a space to find or lose ourselves, a visible context for our engagement with the invisible, the many layers of interpretation depending on the knowledge of the viewer and/or the intent of the artist. The artists in this gallery, of different generations and different backgrounds, are in dialogue with the traditional use, meaning and materials of ink painting.

The centrepiece of the gallery is a monumental four-panel ink painting by Bingyi, entitled *Can the Eyes Sing? The Bodies of the Sacred Mountains*, shown here for the first time outside Beijing (1). Bingyi explores the evolving dynamism of Chinese painting traditions and the alchemy that takes place when ink evokes the mysteries of sacred mountains where Buddhist recluses performed their secret rituals and Daoist immortals attained the utopian paradise of the so-called Peach Blossom Spring revered in ancient poetry. Bingyi created this painting while meditating in the Taihang mountains in China, a mountain range running down the edge of the loess plateau in Henan province. The brushwork is a virtuoso explosion of dark black ink dramatically swirling through the misty peaks, the solid and void of the composition highlighting the turbulence of the volatile spiritual journey through the landscape. Bingyi describes her emotions as she “performed” this landscape: “I painted this in the Taihang mountains. The mountains are composed of two forces, the round and the soft, and the sharp and aggressive. They are portraits of souls, with faces and eyes all over them... When [the viewer] is up close [to the painting] one may see eyes, one may see human figures and one may see details of the universe but when you stay at a distance, you will see the magical mountains from the Song dynasty.”<sup>3</sup> Two intimate fan-shaped paintings, from Bingyi’s *Fairies* series, are also shown in the Asia Society exhibition to show the breadth of her creative practice (7).

Zhang Jian-Jun created his new painting, *Rubbing Planet in Shui-mo Space*, specifically for this exhibition (8). Zhang returned to the United States in spring 2022 after spending the Covid lockdown in Shanghai. Inspired by the unlimited space and broad vistas of California, Zhang felt a new freedom in pursuing his painting and reconnected with his own spiritual journey to revisit and reinvent his *Rubbing*

*Planet* series, first started a decade earlier. The Chinese term, *shui-mo*, refers to the water (*shui*) and ink (*mo*) of Chinese landscape painting traditions, typically on rice paper. Here, Zhang uses Chinese ink, oil paint, acrylic and rice paper on canvas to create a three-dimensional painting, hoping “to break out of the limitations” of earlier materials and subjects of Chinese landscape painting traditions. The rice paper is delicately layered onto the canvas, while the deeply textured surface of the painted planet creates a *shui-mo* space that floats and moves in conjunction with the energies and patterns of orbiting constellations. When Zhang was five years old, his teacher asked him about his dreams for the future. Zhang replied: “I want to be an astronomer and I want to be an artist”.<sup>4</sup> In this revelatory painting, Zhang summons the memories of Daoist philosophical ideals and art historical precedents to create what he says is a “very personal dialogue with tradition in my own way”.

Some artists challenge art historical traditions by moving beyond the brush. To create these evocative landscapes, Wu Chi-tsung prepares layers of cyanotype photographic paper, a method used since the mid-19th century. He treats the *xuan* paper, the material used in traditional Chinese ink landscapes, with a photosensitive coating. The multiple pieces of paper are crumpled, exposed to sunlight and then mounted into collaged images that resemble the craggy mountain peaks of Chinese ink *shan shui* (literally: mountain and water) landscape painting (9). He is creating ink landscapes without the ink, replacing the traditional materials of ink and brush with experimental photography to reinvent the process. Fu Xiaotong uses thousands of pinpricks to “paint with needles”, creating sculptural images of undulating peaks and turbulent waves with five different ways of perforating the surface of the *xuan* paper (10). The number of pinpricks used in her labour-intensive process is highlighted in the title of the work, in this case she has pierced her paper 719,560 times, activating the sculptural quality of the paper with what she calls a “new material language” in order to evoke the mysteries of what are traditionally black ink landscapes.

In this self-portrait in her first museum exhibition, Ren Light Pan, the Chinese-American artist, uses the physical materiality of ink to create an impression of her body on canvas as part of her very personal spiritual and physical journey (11). Ren is a transgender artist living in New York’s East Village. Before her transition, she created a series of four *Sleep Paintings*, three of which survive. The intensive physical process to make the painting required her to sleep with her body pressed against the back side of the cotton canvas. The evaporation of water caused by her body heat resulted in the carbon particles of the Chinese ink, poured down the front of the painting, to deposit variably on the surface. Ren has described the “capillary action of the ink combined with thermodynamics”, causing the water to “create an equilibrium where water is always reestablishing itself”. These are what Ren calls “blind paintings”, as she cannot see the results until after the work is completed. She sees her *Sleep Paintings* as an “exposure in a film roll”, documenting a stage in her personal journey and that, by creating the painting, her body “takes on meaning it didn’t have before”. Ren wants her very poignant and provocative painting not to be seen as an imprint on canvas, but rather that the ink evokes “[her] energy and



9 Wu Chi-tsung (born 1981, lives in Taipei and New York City), *Wrinkled Texture 113*, 2021, cyanotype photography, *xuan* paper mounted as a hanging scroll. Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly. Photo by Jason Wyche

<sup>2</sup> Author’s interview with Zheng Chongbin on February 26th, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Author’s private correspondence with Bingyi on January 20th, 2023. For more on Bingyi’s ink painting, also see Susan L. Beningson, “Contemporary Chinese Art in the Brooklyn Museum”, *Arts of Asia*, September–October 2018 issue.

<sup>4</sup> Author’s interview with Zhang Jian-Jun on January 9th, 2023.



10 From left: Irene Zhou (Zhou Lüyun, 1924–2011, lived in Hong Kong and Australia), *The Universe Lies Beneath*, 1998, mixed media on silk. Collection of Mee-seen Loong and Jeffrey Hantover; Ren Light Pan; View of Zheng Chongbin's painting in the next gallery; Fu Xiaotong (born 1976, lives in Beijing), *719,560 Pinpricks*, 2019, handmade *xuan* paper. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Arts; Bingy



11 Ren Light Pan (born 1990, lives in New York City), *Sleep Painting-12.31.14*, 2014, water, body heat, ink and despair on canvas. Courtesy of the artist

life essence, [her] *qi* as a human being in the universe and [her] beating heart as proof of life”.<sup>5</sup>

Equally personal is the painting by Irene Zhou, who was a proponent of the New Ink Painting movement in Hong Kong in the 1970s (10). Zhou's work was deeply informed by her exposure to Western abstract expressionism, as well as her knowledge of Daoist and Neo-Confucian philosophy and Buddhism. Her Chinese given name, “Luyun”, literally means “green cloud” and green was a signifier for herself. The red spheres and lines in the painting become abstract symbols for the artist's communion with the cosmos, this painting becoming for Zhou a kind of “alternative self-portrait”. Her teacher, Lui Shou-kwan, pioneered new painting techniques in the 1970s in Hong Kong, which laid the foundation for the evolving dynamism of ink painting today. Lui's uniquely innovative *Zen Painting* series was not only inspired by Buddhism, but also by Confucian and Daoist sources. The extraordinary *Zen Painting* in this exhibition shows layers of ink wash creating a luminous atmosphere suffused with different shades of blue and yellow, both on top and under the black ink, to create a depth of infinite space and time and hint at spontaneous spiritual enlightenment (12).

### **Landscapes, Cityscapes: Lost and Haunted**

The Three Gorges Dam project, spanning the Yangtse River, created the largest hydroelectric river dam in human history. The human cost of building the dam has been catastrophic, causing the forced migration of 1.3 million people, the flooding of 1400 villages and towns and the destruction of numerous historical and archaeological sites now permanently lost under the submerged landscape. The threat of the environment effects from industrial pollution, created by the flooded buildings and factories, looms over the water and air of these rural Chinese villages. One of the highlights of this exhibition is the famous hand scroll of the *Three Gorges Dam Migration* by Yun-Fei Ji (13), more than ten feet in length. We are proud that the artist has



12 From left: Bingyi; Zhang Jian-Jun; Zhan Wang (born 1962, lives in Beijing), *Garden Rock #29*, 2001, stainless steel. Private Collection, New York; Lui Shou-kwan (1919–1975, lived in Hong Kong), *Zen Painting*, 1974, Chinese ink and colour on *xuan* paper. Collection of Alisan Fine Arts; Wu Chi-Tsung



13 Yun-Fei Ji (born 1963, lives in New Jersey), *Three Gorges Dam Migration* (detail), 2008, ink and watercolour on *xuan* paper mounted on silk. Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan Gallery

given us the rare opportunity to display here in Texas the original painting on which the woodblock print, created in 2009 to benefit the Library Council of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, was based. Ji personally travelled around the ruined villages of the Three Gorges Dam region, witnessing the traumatic decomposition of the land-

scape, which he then illustrated in this monumental hand scroll. His dense compositions and subtle brushwork engage

<sup>5</sup> Author's interview with Ren Light Pan on August 21st, 2022.



14 Liu Xiaodong (born 1963, lives in Beijing), *Wolf Smoke (Smoke Signals)*, 2006, oil on canvas. Private Collection, New York

with monumental landscapes of the Song and Yuan (1279–1368) dynasties, as well as a long tradition in Chinese painting known since the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127) as *liuming tu* (images of refugees). The muted colours conjure up ghost-like figures of the displaced inhabitants of the city, known as “floating weeds” (*foucao*), and their suffering in light of an uncertain future. He writes: “I found that some villages were already gone, yet not completely razed to the ground. People had to tear down their houses before they moved out. All of it was slated to be buried underwater... I’m interested in villagers and how they adapted when forced to move to the city. They lived on the margins... and were very creative in finding ways to survive. These are the people who are building modern China.” Ji continues, “I wondered where all those ghosts [in the submerged cities] would go when everyone had been relocated, and imagined they would have to move too. I imagined how lonely it would be for them to be left behind.”

Liu Xiaodong’s powerful painting, *Wolf Smoke (Smoke Signals)*, is also a dramatic response to the Three Gorges Dam project (14). His painting is a narrative about loss and the spiritual cost of material progress. It is a painting of contrasts, using the craggy blue mountain peaks in the background as a counterpoint to the grittiness of the black smoke polluting the air and hinting at the destruction of

both the environment and peoples’ lives. In the bottom left of the painting, the migrant workers, who built the dam, mingle with local inhabitants by the shores of the Yangtse River. Some say this painting bears witness to the collapse of wooden scaffolding which fell on the workers; the disaster was further compounded by the fire that ensued, killing some of the people in this tragic and ominous event. Zhang Dali’s sculpture, from his series, *100 Chinese*, here includes ten unique portraits of migrant workers cast in synthetic resin (15). Zhang wanted to document the plight of these workers and their families, who lack the official documentation needed for stable jobs, schools or medical treatment and, therefore, do not technically exist in any official capacity in the urban metropolises where they stream in to find work. Zhang has explained that his work is “a means of interacting with and memorialising the temporary environment that surrounds me in Beijing”. These workers symbolise the human cost of the rapid urbanisation in China and the destruction and displacement for rural and urban communities. Some of the resin sculptures still have minute hairs from the eyebrows of the workers embedded in them. Zhang has said that “these works possess ‘souls’ and [he] considers this direct, instantaneous method of copying their images to be the most sensitive and truthful way to record human existence”.

Wang Tiande and Xu Bing both explore fragmented and



reinterpreted landscapes in dramatically different ways in their works in the exhibition. Wang Tiande's poetic landscape combines layers of rice paper, Chinese ink, stele rubbings and burn marks, created by incense sticks, to create a magical vision haunted by impending ecological crisis (16). The main panel consists of at least two sheets of paper, layered on top of each other with the bottom depicting haunting images of craggy trees in black ink, and the upper burned by the end of a long incense stick typically used in Buddhist ritual, but here used in lieu of a paintbrush. The figures on the boat, literally burned by the incense sticks into the icy water in the middle-left side of the composition, struggle to survive in the bleak landscape. Wang's fractured and disembodied image conveys the ephemeral nature of Chinese historic traditions in contemporary China. Wang has discussed his process as resembling that of "burning" information, or in this case layers of Chinese tradition onto digital drives.

Xu Bing has invented the English term, *Landscape* (in Chinese: *wenzi xiesheng*), to describe landscapes created using Chinese characters as pictorial elements; for example, the character for mountain (*shan*) is used to create the mountain peaks (17). The characters vary among different calligraphic styles, including standard script (*kaishu*), grass script (*caoshu*), simplified characters, archaic bronze and oracle-bone scripts. *Landscape* is a cerebral submersion into nature, as well as an unique way of using language to deconstruct a pictorial composition and to challenge the relationship between word and image. Here the words flow over and create dangerous mountains, threatening us with their massive volume, while the solid and voids of the painting, and the contrasting dark and light ink, reveal our changing relationship to the natural world and the ominous consequences of the environment in flux.



15 Zhang Dali (born 1963, lives in Beijing), *100 Chinese*, 2001, synthetic resin. Courtesy of the artist and Eli Klein Gallery

### Language and Scholarly Traditions: Remembered and Reinvented

One of the highlights of this exhibition is Xu Bing's iconic hand scroll, the original painting of his *Introduction to Square Word Calligraphy (New English Calligraphy)*, 1994–1996, that was later reproduced in the form of a printed book. Xu Bing's two hanging scrolls, *Square Word Calligraphy: The Song of Wandering Aengus Poem by William Butler Yeats*, and the rarely seen preliminary drawings for the two paintings are also on display in the exhibition (18). In Xu's paintings, the Yeats poem is read from left to right, following English word order, and from top to bottom in columns, as in



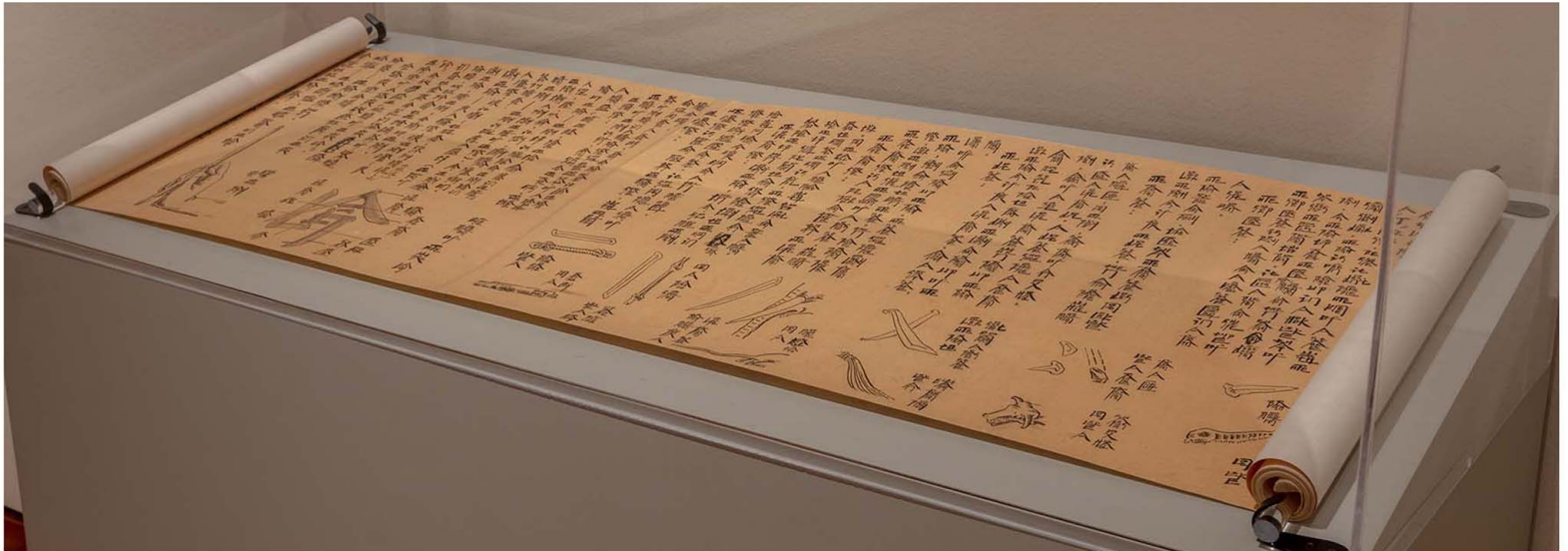
16 From left: Yang Yongliang, *Phantom Landscape III, page 1 and page 2*, both 2007, media inkjet print on paper, Private Collection, New York; Wang Tiande (born 1960, lives in Shanghai), *Playing with the Snow on the Boat*, 2019, ink, rubbing and burn marks on *xuan* paper. Collection of Diane H. Schafer



17 On far left: Xu Bing (born 1955, lives in Beijing and Brooklyn), *Landscape*, 2002–2003, ink on paper. Private Collection, New York



18 Xu Bing, *Square Word Calligraphy—The Song of Wandering Aengus Poem by William Butler Yeats* (Parts A and B), 1999, ink on paper. Private Collection, New York



19 Xu Bing, *Introduction to Square Word Calligraphy (New English Calligraphy)*, 1994–1996, ink on paper. Private Collection, New York

traditional Chinese texts. In 1993, when he was living in Brooklyn, New York, Xu began developing *Square Word Calligraphy*, an unique conceptual language organised in square blocks shaped like Chinese characters, but composed of English letters. The *Introduction to Square Word Calligraphy* is meant to be a textbook on how to write his new language: in describing the brushwork, the horizontal stroke should be strong and taut “like a bridled horse, not a rotted log”, and the brush movement for a left-falling stroke should be strong “like an elephant tusk, not a mouse tail” (19). Xu has said: “Through this kind of English calligraphy, I gave the West a calligraphic culture with an Eastern form. This text is suspended between two concepts. It belongs, and yet doesn’t belong, to both sides. When people write it, they really don’t know whether they’re writing Chinese or English. If I had continued living in China, this work would definitely never have appeared, because the cultural conflict wouldn’t have been so direct. And it wouldn’t have become such a vital problem for me. It was a result of my

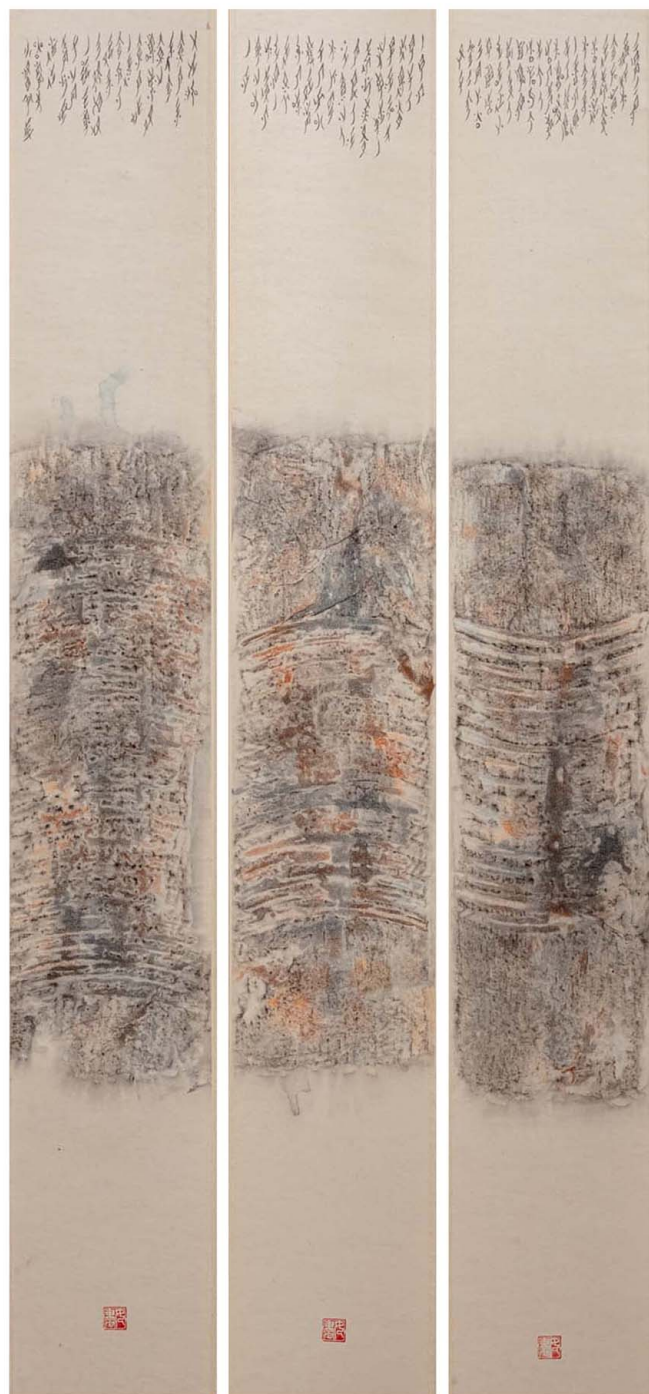
living in New York.”<sup>6</sup> Some of the visitors in the exhibition must have felt the same way, as one family tried to read the characters as if they were Chinese until they realised that they were English letters.

Tao Aimin’s artistic practice explores the daily lives and often forgotten personal histories of women in rural China (20). Here she creates ink rubbings from wooden washboards collected on trips to her family’s home village, in similar fashion to those traditionally made from stone steles and calligraphic inscriptions in premodern China. She then inscribed the scrolls, on which the rubbings were mounted, with stories in the women’s language, known as *nǚshu*, a colloquial language spoken exclusively by the local women of the Yao minority in Jiangyong county, Hunan province, where *nǚshu* was invented and used. Tao writes: “So why did I combine the Jiangyong *nǚshu* with washboards? Because I think that the Jiangyong *nǚshu* is a language, just as the washboards are a type of language—they both tell stories... These rubbings were all printed using washboards.

I did not use my hands. I just let the ink run down by itself... I have elevated the washboards to give them the status of traditional Chinese literati ink paintings. The lines on the washboard and the flowing ink... also look like ripples in water.” She continues discussing the painting displayed at Asia Society: “*In a Twinkle* is very long, about three metres. I came up with the title because the patterns of the washboards reminded me of fingerprints... It creates the feeling of an ink landscape, but it was printed with the type of washboards that have bottle tops nailed on them. I used rice paper. It looks a bit like the Dunhuang frescoes because of its blurriness and the way it settles.” The *nüshu* inscriptions at the top of each of the three hanging scrolls describe relationships between family members and very personal hardships faced by the women in her rural village.

The monumental painting, *Taihu Rock of the Liuyuan Garden*, by Liu Dan depicts a type of rock revered in Daoist philosophy as symbolic of utopian paradises where immortals gathered (21). The most prized of these limestone rocks were found in the Taihu Lake area near Suzhou in Jiangsu province, with craggy forms that naturally resulted from erosion by water and acidic soil. Such rocks were also found in the gardens or, in miniature scale, on the desks of Confucian scholars, who installed them as focal points for meditation. For Liu Dan, Scholar’s Rocks are seen in a very personal light as the “stem cells or the DNA” in the structure of Chinese landscape painting: “they create the basic building block for depicting sacred mountains and embodying the spirit and life force (*qi*) within them”.<sup>7</sup> For Kelly Wang, a young Chinese-American artist from New York, Scholar’s Rocks are equally personal, but in a very different way (22). She writes: “The series, *Microcosms of Mourning* [and *Entanglement*], uses newspapers my mother and I saved in April 2020, while my father was hospitalised for COVID-19. After months of emotional and psychological upheaval following his death, I began twisting strips of the saved newspapers into strings, imagining that time could be frozen into a space generated by strings, as in string theory, and take on physical permanence. In my hands, the words on the paper collapse into a feeling, the strings became lifelines connecting the present to memories, the living to the dead, light to dark matter, and the individual to the collective through a multidimensional labyrinth of space-time... Scholar’s rocks, traditionally objects of contemplation, took on new meaning as entities that had undergone trauma, erosion and bruising over time due to natural and artificial interference. Comprised of thousands of twisted strands of newspaper, they also reinterpret brushstrokes in a three-dimensional form.”

In addition to the newspaper-formed sculpture of the scholar’s rock called *Entanglement*, the artist created three framed works displayed on the wall behind the sculpture of the rock (23). Here the twisted paper, attached to canvas, creates images alluding to traditional Chinese scholar’s rocks. *Microcosm 12*, on the far-right of the wall, references the famous Ming dynasty (1368–1644) painting, *Ten Views of a Lingbi Stone*, by Wu Bin, dated 1610. Fantastic rock formations were perceived as miniature mountains permeated with the magical powers of sacred Buddhist and Daoist peaks. Like the human body, stones were believed to be born, to live and to die, just as were mountains themselves. The words “to bury dead” and “struggle” can be seen in the twisted newspaper strands in the bottom-middle of



20 Tao Aimin (born 1974, lives in Beijing), *In a Twinkle No. 6*, 2011, set of three hanging scrolls, ink, colour and rubbing on paper. Courtesy of artist and INKstudio

Wang’s rock, showing how she has folded the process of mourning into her work.

### Storytelling: Word and Image

In her series of female ghost stories, *The One in My Dreams*, Peng Wei continues her dialogues with women from earlier generations (24). Instead of focusing on the normally

<sup>6</sup>For more on Xu Bing, see Susan L. Beningson, “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry: A Conversation with Xu Bing at his Brooklyn Studio,” Brooklyn Museum issue, *Arts of Asia*, Vol. 50, no. 2, 2020, pp. 71–76.

<sup>7</sup>For more on Liu Dan’s work, see the catalogue published in conjunction with the exhibition: Liu Yang, *Ink Unbound: Paintings by Liu Dan*, Minneapolis Institute of Art, 2016.



21 From left: Hong Lei (born 1960, lives in Changzhou), *Chinese landscape: Liu Garden (Zhuozhengyuan Suzhou)*, both 1998, chromogenic print. Private Collection, New York; Liu Dan (born 1953, lives in Beijing), *Taihu Rock of the Liuyuan Garden*, 2019, ink on *xuan* paper. Collection of Henry and Vanessa Cornell



22 Kelly Wang (born 1992, lives in New York City). *Entanglement*, 2021, newspaper, wire, muslin, acrylic and wire. Courtesy of the artist



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On the wall from left to right: Kelly Wang, *Microcosm 7*, 2021; *Microcosm 8*, 2021; *Microcosm 12*, 2022, all newspaper on muslin. Courtesy of the artist. Scholar's Rock sculpture: Kelly Wang, *Entanglement*, 2021, newspaper, wire, muslin, acrylic and wire. Courtesy of the artist

discussed Confucian exemplars of female virtue, as found in Liu Xiang's Western Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 8) text, *Biographies of Exemplary Women (Lienü zhuan)*, Peng instead highlights female ghosts and fox spirits from Pu Songling's *Strange Tales from the Chinese Studio (Liaozhai shiyi)*, circa late 17th–early 18th century, as well as other tales of the strange and supernatural. In doing so, she transforms individual women from model stereotypes, and instead creates images of independent, larger than life individuals with their own agency. In the four exquisite album leaves displayed at Asia Society, Peng picks a pivotal image in the story to highlight the strength and resilience of the female ghost, turning the female apparition into a spectacle. Each of their stories is inscribed in elegant calligraphy. She has also juxtaposed the letters of Western authors, including Charlotte Bronte, Marina Tsvetaeva, Anna Akhmatova and Susan Sontag, to create a conversation with real women of different

generations in an attempt to recontextualise the disoriented persona of the female ghost.

Prints from Hong Hao's *Selected Scriptures* in the exhibition include *Meidusazhifa*, juxtaposing the *Raft of the Medusa* from Gericault, the 19th century French painter, with Jiang Taigong, the godly fisherman in *Shishuo Xinyu (Worldly Tales)*, *Sunzi's The Art of War*, as well as other images. *Selected Scriptures* is a series of prints made to resemble the pages of a traditional Chinese thread-bound atlas opened to a random page. Hong has written that he meant to “reshuffle various aspects of culture, to effectively dissolve boundaries and meanings... I would also like to make my works appear as ‘respectable’ as the ancient classics” (25).

Lin Guocheng's exquisite ink pen technique is inspired by his passion for European Mediaeval and Renaissance drawings, but in *Prehistoric*, his work is based on his conception of the universe inspired by Chapter One of the



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Peng Wei (born 1974, lives in Beijing), *The One in My Dreams, Huanniang 2*, 2020, ink and colour on flax paper. Courtesy of the artist and Tina Keng Foundation

*Thousand Character Classic (Qian Zi Wen)*, focusing on “Cosmology and the World” (26). He writes: “The ancients often exclaimed that the universe is vast, the physical body is limited, and the world is impermanent. And I try to turn this kind of life whirlpool feeling into a series of creations.”<sup>8</sup> By combining Western pen with Chinese ink, Lin creates a thunderous cosmos filled with billowing clouds alternately beckoning us toward safety or danger, churning with its undulating lines to evoke a sense of metamorphosis and urgency. Cosmological turbulence is also seen in Fung Ming Chip’s *Post Marijuana, Sand Script* (27). Fung’s dark calligraphic swirls create rapidly rotating columns that churn the air with tornado-like intensity. Raking beams of light, created by paler ink, are layered over more traditionally written characters, that are revealed in fragmented pieces. The contrasting light and dark ink focus the viewer’s attention on the images, as they ebb and flow in rhythmic pulsating layers of ink, creating a dynamic and three-dimensional composition.

In the *Whispers of Trees-Tea*, Chu Chu has integrated her devotion to ink painting and calligraphy with her passion for nature (28). She collected tree branches near her home in Hangzhou, picking those with bare branches over flowering ones, inspired by Daoist texts about the “pure spirit” in nature forms. Using traditional Chinese ink and brush, she then painted elegant waves of calligraphy on the photograph, using inscriptions from *The Classic of Tea*, written by Lu Yu circa 780 in the Tang dynasty, to create the shadows of the tree branches. Chu writes that: “when I do calligraphy I slowly place or hide words and passages from Chinese philosophy in the landscape. The act of hiding entails the art of searching [which is] nothing less than the originals of Chinese culture itself which stresses keeping things hidden. In the process of discovery, we can feel the depth and ideas behind this culture.” In *Manuscript of Nature*, Cui Fei coils grape tendrils around thin twigs that are then attached to the back panel of the work (28). The



25 Hong Hao (born 1965, lives in Beijing), *Selected Scriptures: The Art of War*, 1996, silkscreened ink and colour on paper. Private Collection, New York

rows are ordered in vertical lines, the twisting and turning reminiscent of Chinese running or semi-cursive script (*xingshu*), a style of calligraphy that appeared after the Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 220). Cui’s work also replicates characteristics that define masterful brushwork including the modulation of the line, as it goes from thick to thin, while the contrast between dark and light twigs and tendrils alludes to varying ink tones. Through her use of innovative materials, the artist transforms the written character into a three-dimensional ode to the origins of language.

<sup>8</sup> Author’s private communication with Lin Guocheng, January 4th, 2023.



26 Lin Guocheng (born 1979, lives in Beijing), *Prehistoric*, 2016, ink and pen on paper. Private Collection, New York



27 Fung Ming Chip (born 1951, lives in Hong Kong), *Post Marijuana, Sand Script*, 2012, ink on xuan paper, mounted on silk. Private Collection, New York



28 From left: Chu Chu (born 1975, lives in Hangzhou), *Whispers of Trees-Tea*, 2011–2017, digital ink jet print and brush and ink on paper. Collection of Alisan Fine Arts; Cui Fei (born 1970, lives in New York City), *Manuscript of Nature V\_005\_3*, 2013, tendrils and pins on paper. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art

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Qiu Anxiong (born 1972, lives in Shanghai), from right: *New Classic of Mountains and Seas: Qi Nu Gan (Chinook Helicopter)*, 2018; *New Classic of Mountains and Seas: Ha Lei (Harley Davidson)*, 2018, both ink and colour on paper. Private Collection, New York





30 Jennifer Wen Ma (born 1973, lives in New York City and Beijing), *In Furious Bloom III*, 2016, inkjet print on Canson edition etching paper. Collection of Sarah Hogate Bacon. Image courtesy of the artist

the Asia Society exhibition also has two rare paintings from his recent continuation of the series in 2018. These paintings, in traditional fan-shaped format, show a Harley Davidson motorcycle (*Ha Lei*) and Chinook helicopter (*Qi Nu Gan*), the latter with elephants playfully dangling from the wings of the flying machine (29). The text for *Ha Lei* (Harley Davidson) reads: “It moves at the speed of electricity. It storms off like a rolling thunder. It travels thousands of miles in the wind. Unfettered between heaven and earth. It is called *Ha Lei*.”<sup>9</sup>

Jennifer Wen Ma has a broad artistic practice encompassing video, public art, painting and performance art. Ma was part of the core creative team for the 2008 Beijing Olympics and received an Emmy Award for the production. She has since then increasingly focused her work on explorations of the philosophical underpinning and materiality of Chinese ink traditions. Her evocative photograph, *In Furious Bloom III*, records an installation at the exhibition, *Compulsive Beauty*, held in Seoul, South Korea, in 2010 (30). Rather than the usual tradition of painting images of flowering plants, the petals of blooming chrysanthemums were instead painted black with Chinese ink. The ink itself is made of organic materials and would stunt the photosynthesis of the plants, but not end them. Over time, the artist observed: “new greenery would emerge from within the black to give evidence to the perseverance and resilience of life”.



31 Far right: Wang Fangyu (1913–1997, lived in China and in New Jersey), *The Past Weighing on the Present* (Gu Jin), 1991, ink on paper. Private Collection

In the powerful ink painting, *The Past Weighing on the Present*, by Wang Fangyu, the well-known calligrapher and collector, the artist eloquently presents the character 古 (*gu*), meaning “the past” or “ancient” turned upside down and literally weighing down with its dark black ink on the character 今 (*jin*), meaning “the present”, in lighter ink (31). This tension between past and what will create the future is at the heart of this exhibition. The intergenerational dialogue, between some of the most important artists of Chinese descent and emerging young artists, transforms memories from the past into something new, relevant and changing, responding to the world today and their own personal journeys. In “Summoning Memories: Art Beyond Chinese Traditions”, the endurance and continued resilience of art historical practice and cultural tradition prove to be dynamic, kept vibrant through experimentation.

<sup>9</sup>Translation of the text on the Qiu Anxiong paintings by Ashley N. Wu.

*“Summoning Memories: Art Beyond Chinese Traditions” is on view at the Asia Society Texas Center, 1370 Southmore Blvd, Museum District, Houston, Texas, until July 2nd, 2023. A Scholar’s Day for the exhibition will be held in late May.*

*All installation photos of the exhibition are courtesy of the Asia Society Texas Center (Alex Barber).*

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