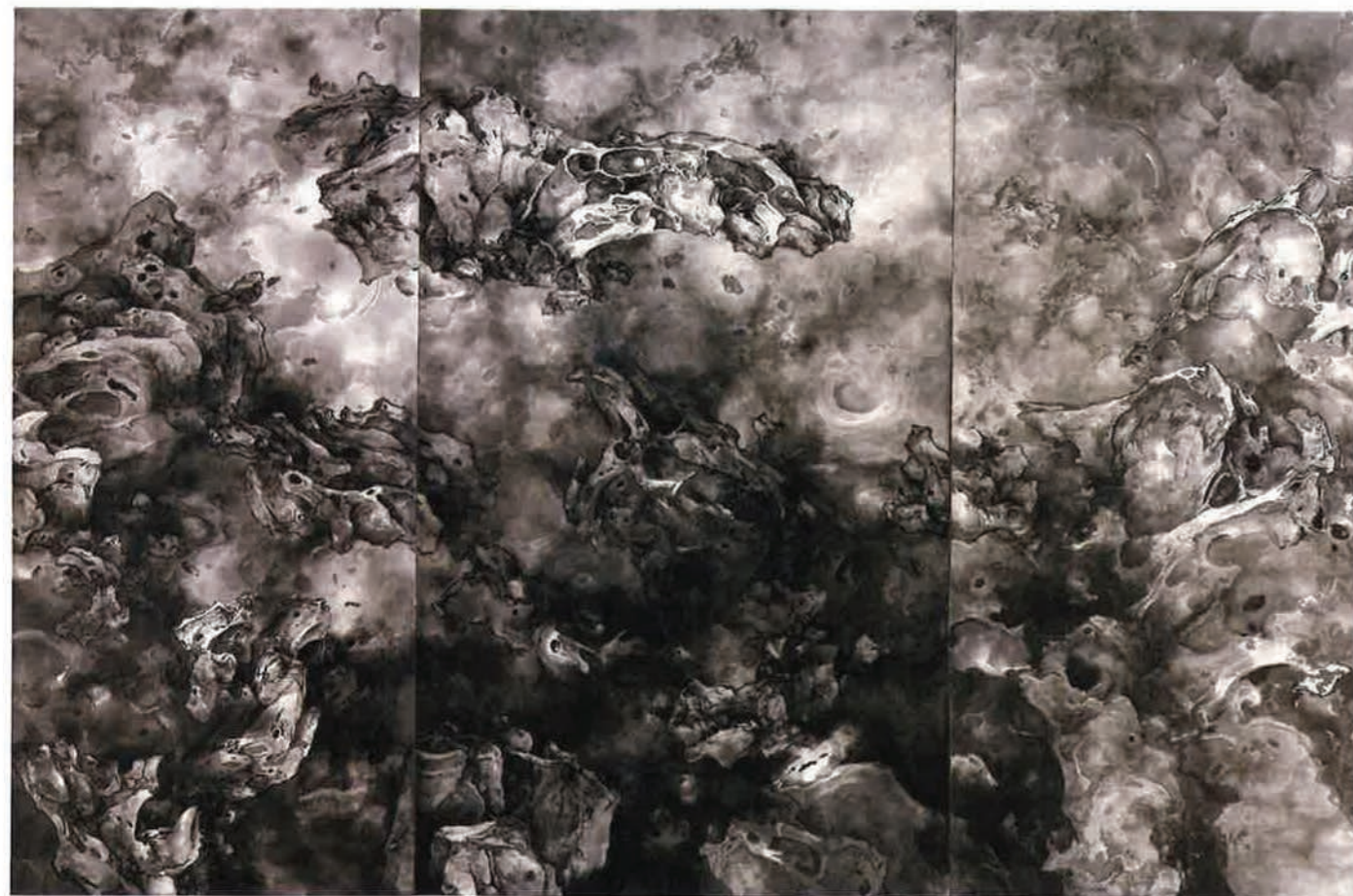


# Think Ink

AN EXHIBITION OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE PAINTINGS REVEALS THE CONTINUED FRESHNESS AND POTENCY OF THE MEDIUM OF INK, WHILE ADHERING TO CENTURIES-OLD TRADITIONS. BY MARTINA D'AMATO



From top: Tai Xiangzhou, *Celestial Chaos* No. 8, 2015, ink on silk; Zheng Chongbin, *Chimeric Landscape*, 2015, multi-media installation.



THE ART OF ink painting has been fundamental to Chinese artistic practice for millennia. Thus, pure ink painting—that is, *sans couleurs*—has come to be defined in the modern era by prevailing 19th- and 20th-century ideas of national identity and is referred to as “national-style painting” (*guo-hua*). Stanford University’s exhibition at the Cantor Arts Center, “Ink Worlds: Contemporary Chinese Painting From the Collection of Akiko Yamazaki and Jerry Yang” (through September 3), both embraces and pushes

back against this modern definition in relation to nationhood through comparison with other contemporary two-dimensional arts. How does an ancient art form stand its ground against oil painting, printmaking, and (the comparatively neonatal) photography today? Moreover, how does it do so while still adhering to philosophies about ink, particularly the union and careful balance of art and nature, that have been essential dicta for generations?

“Ink Worlds” gives a gorgeous glimpse into how contemporary artists have found and mastered their own balance in the present day and beyond. At the same time, they challenge the Western notion of the importance of color in fine art, casting ink painting not into its own category but rather reconsidering painting more generally as a

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method that need not rely on or be inhibited by color, a theory put forth as early as in the Tang dynasty. Richard Vinograd, Christensen Fund Professor in Asian Art at Stanford, traces this lineage in the exhibition’s lushly illustrated accompanying catalogue, citing Tang theorist Zhang Yanyuan’s *History of Famous Paintings of All Dynasties*, from the year 847: “Anything in nature created by the opposite forces of *yin* and *yang* could be depicted with the mysterious charm of ink and the painter’s exquisite skill ... If one’s mind dwells only on colors, then the images of things might lose their essential charm.”

I

Ink painting’s long and rich history, as passed down in the texts of Tang painters and writers like Zhang, as well as its elevation through Song-dynasty scholarly practice, which is the subject of Ellen Huang’s contribution to the exhibition catalogue, becomes as significant an element for contemporary artists as the natural harmony to which they adhere. The artists whose works are collected in “Ink Worlds” draw on this great past, while also keeping an alert eye on the future, expressing these lineages and projections by means ranging from the literal to the abstract. Li Huayi’s paintings immediately evoke Song-dynasty landscapes on a massive scale, as with *Dragons Hiding in Mountain Ridge* (2008), a work that also melds the formats of vertical scroll painting and horizontally-oriented panorama. The immersive experience of Zheng Chongbin’s *Chimeric Landscape* (2015) gives new meaning to the Song-dynasty term “ink play”; digitally-born lines dance across darkened walls, reflecting against floor and ceiling to create



Clockwise from top: Li Huayi, *Dragons Hidden in Mountain Ridge*, 2008, ink on paper; Irene Chou, *Untitled*, 1995, ink and color on paper; Qin Feng, *Desire Scenery No. 1*, 2007, ink on paper.



From top: Liu Guosong, *Zen Dream*, 1966, ink and light color on paper;  
Gu Wenda, *China Park #3: Wind and Rain*, 2011, ink on paper.



an ephemeral tripartite vista of clouds, mountains, and river. Zheng's recent video and installation-based artworks also seem a natural fit for the collection of the tech-driven Yang, who co-founded Yahoo and now heads AME Cloud Ventures.

Driving home the international reach of the exhibition, these artists hail from across East Asia, Europe, and North America. The inclusion of a work by Franz Kline is not unknown territory in relation to Japanese and Chinese calligraphy, or even to the collection of Yamazaki and Yang. Despite Kline's belief that his work was un-calligraphic, American art critics placed importance on the connection, which actually led Kline to correspond directly with Japanese abstract artists and calligraphers. The Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2014 exhibition of calligraphy from Jerry Yang's own collection, "Out of Character," also referenced the American artist's relationship to Chinese practices.

One of the few purely calligraphic works in the show, *Mountains High, Waters Long* (1995) by Tong Yangtze, similarly bridges the worlds of Eastern and Western art. At the same time, her work shows the opening to women of arts traditionally reserved for men. Tong began practicing calligraphy as a child in

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Clockwise from top: Zheng Chongbin, *Chimeric Landscape (alternative view)*, 2015, multi-media installation; Lü Shoukun, *Chan Painting*, 1970, ink and color on paper; Arnold Chang, *Mindscape*, 2011, ink on paper.



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Shanghai, but she completed her formal training with a master's degree in oil painting and ceramics from the University of Massachusetts. Another standout piece by a woman, and one of the few to breach the monochromatic palette central to ink painting in her own form of "ink play," is an untitled abstract painting from 1995 by Irene Chou, whose expressive works reflect a synthesis of the Abstract Expressionism of artists like Kline with Chinese calligraphy and painting. Chou's abstracted landscape of black line and color provides a sort of sunrise in the exhibition, greeting the visitor upon entrance.

In an important text on the methods of ink painting, Tang theorist Jing Hao (circa 855–915) referred to "ink" (*mo*) and "brush" (*bi*) as the essential ingredients of paintings and as the characters used to describe the attainment of the highest level of artistic practice with each of those objects. "Ink Worlds" highlights these two tools in both their practical and theoretical manifestations not only to mark the important links between the past and the present, the scholar of medieval China and the contemporary artist connected to the globe, but also to suggest a new future for ink painting. **A**

