

Zhang Zhaohui: The Essence of Light

By Richard Vine

At midcareer, Zhang Zhaohui is an artist fully equipped—both conceptually and technically—to infuse Chinese ink painting with selected elements of Western modernism, thus producing a hybrid form that revitalizes his culture's single most representative medium. This creative dualism began with the painter's education and has found its fullest expression in his art.

Zhang graduated from college in 1988 and was hired as an assistant curator at the National Art Museum in Beijing (NAMOC). During his seven years there, he worked with many international galleries, museums, and foundations, thereby gaining a firsthand acquaintance with today's global art system and helping to bring to China shows by such figures as Gilbert & George (Britain), Pierre Soulages (France), and Antoni Tàpies (Spain). Meanwhile, within China, artistic ferment continued in the massive "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition at NAMOC in 1989, the Yuanmingyuan and Beijing East Village artist neighborhoods, stylistic movements such as Cynical Realism and Political Pop, and collectives like the New Measurement Group in Beijing and the Big-Tail Elephant Group in Guangzhou.

Zhang's position at NAMOC was in the folk art department, dealing with rural artifacts, so he was not directly involved in "China/Avant-Garde." But he was witness to the entire event and deeply absorbed by the attendant colloquium and other debates. As a devotee and practitioner of ink painting, Zhang wrangled personally with the question of how China's signature art form could be reconciled with the formal disruptions of contemporary art. His quest led him to obtain an MA in art history in 1992 from the Chinese National Academy of Arts, Beijing, a school known for its emphasis on traditional Chinese arts with an admixture of Western academic-style painting.

In 1995, Zhang traveled to the United States thanks to a grant from New York's Asian Cultural Council. Soon he enrolled upstate at Bard College—a famed bastion of advanced art theory—in the program called Curatorial Studies in Contemporary Art. During the summer of 1997, Zhang served as an intern at the Asia Society in New York, where art historian Gao Minglu (formerly one of the chief organizers of "China/Avant-Garde") was in the process of curating the landmark exhibition "Inside Out: New Chinese Art," which presented experimental work from seventy-two individual artists and groups from mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Asked by a skeptical fellow curator if he thought that examples of ink painting belonged in the show, Zhang argued for their inclusion, saying they represented a new stage, a new adaptation, of this ancient but constantly evolving medium. His increasingly fascination with the impact of Western modernism on Asia—particularly as manifest in the works of pioneering artists like Isamu Naguchi, Nam June Paik, and Lee Ufan—led Zhang to organize a 1998 Bard College master's thesis exhibition titled "Where Heaven and Earth Meet: Xu Bing & Cai Guo-Qiang."

Returning to China in 2000, Zhang studied in the graduate art history program at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, for three years (2003-06), ultimately deciding to

forgo a dissertation and a secure university teaching career in favor of pursuing his own art. Having made this bold decision, Zhang immediately began to experiment. He founded the Fingers group in the 798 art district in 2008 and produced such works as *You & Me*, an installation of two life-size male and female cookie-cutter-like metal forms. He used the figure outlines in photographs, shown in grids in the "Together" series, depicting visitors posing next to and inside the silhouettes—a comment on gender conformity and non-conformity, perhaps, and on the ubiquity of the bonds of family and friendship. Zhang also created reflective Metal Man and Mirror Man suits, which he wore in one-person walking performances. In this case, the self was "protected" like a knight inside his armor—or like an everyday citizen playing one of the conventional social roles reflected in the suits' polished surfaces. In the manner of the Mudman (Kim Jones) who began appearing in the U.S. in the 1970s or Zhang Huan wearing a meat suit in his *My New York* performance in 2002, Zhang the artist remained secreted within his outwardly outlandish persona.

It soon became evident, however, that Zhang's mind and heart were set on something more contemplative. He became convinced that traditional Chinese ink painting, in all its flexibility and formal variety, could be adapted to contemporary artistic concerns, both domestic and international, thus becoming a versatile contemporary technique that embraces the global, and the perpetually new, while continuing to honor its own cultural origins. In 2009, Zhang began producing the ink-and-wash drawings of the "Soul Mountain Series," exquisite landscapes combining—in a dark, haunting fashion—the traditional Chinese elements of mountains, water, mist, and light. Yet there is also a hint of Edvard Munch in the oozing semi-abstraction of the interacting areas of earth and sky, in the modernist refusal to particularize trees, rocks, vegetation, dwellings, or human figures. Clearly it is the visual and emotional gestalt of each composition—the black mountains standing solid and stark against the luminous flux of more vaporous components (fog, water, light and shade)—that matters in these works, not any obeisance to literal representation. This interplay between the eternal structures of nature, the abiding physical counterpart of laws of cosmic order and harmony, with its ephemeral daily and hourly effects of weather, seasons, water flow, and life phases—this is essential theme of Chinese ink art, caught here from a dramatic contemporary perspective.

Over time, this reconciliation of apparent contraries—timelessness and immediacy, tradition and modernity—was capsulized for Zhang in the infinitely adaptable flow of the ink line itself. During a transitional phase, around 2011, he harnessed that flow of parallel lines, varying in weight and speed, to the presentation of lexical forms (for example, the hammer and sickle, the dollar sign), implicitly commenting on the way human consciousness subject to ingrained psychology modalities and the limitations of language itself tends to translate immense political and socioeconomic complexities into simple, easily manipulable signifiers: emblems that are iconic, fraught, almost oracular in their openness to conflicting and ever-changing interpretation.

Zhang soon eschewed that sign-language for pure linear abstraction. By 2012, he was working steadily in the style for which he is now widely known: patterns of black ink lines on paper—sometimes curving, sometimes rectilinear and crisscrossing—that evoke geometric forms and varied illumination as distantly, yet provocatively, as Agnes Martin's grids evoke landscape. Some commentators (notably Clive Tzuang, professor

emeritus, National Taiwan University, in his contribution to the symposium “Century of Light: Art and Science in the Work of Zhang Zhaohui” at Bennett Media Studio in New York in June 2018) have related these patterns to scientific experiments in optics and subatomic physics: the behavior of light waves or photons when subjected to filters. We can understand how this parallel might arise. All depiction, after all, is a study of light—how it pervades the atmosphere, how it strikes objects and reflects at various frequencies to our eyes. Zhang is an intuitive artist, not a research technician, but his long examination of art—and its ways of representing the world (or, more accurately, conditioning our *perceptions*, both retinal and cognitive, of the world)—has taken him into the heart of light itself.

For Western viewers, one of the most puzzling aspects of traditional Chinese painting is the preternatural evenness of its illumination. To eyes conditioned by the dramatic, raking shafts of Caravaggio and the soft volume-modeling interplay of radiance and shadow in Rembrandt and Vermeer, the uniformly “flat” luminosity of much Chinese painting can be disconcerting. And so it remains until one grasps two principles: first, that these ink-and-brush images seek to convey the spiritual essence rather than the natural appearance of their subjects; second, that this calm evenness of illumination echoes a larger sense of cosmic order, a belief in the transcendent harmony of life’s rhythms and cyclical changes, whether seasonal, historical, or personal.

Something like that traditional Chinese notion is manifest in the work of America’s nineteenth-century Luminist landscape painters and even in the light-drenched images of Europe’s Impressionists. Yet, in the West, there is always a countercurrent at work, because light is historically conceived by Euro-American thinkers as an active agent. In mythology, creation itself begins with the divine commandment “let there be light.” Later, brightness struggles with darkness—good against evil—in the Manichean philosophical schema. Dante, in the fourteenth century, equates light with God’s love, radiating outward through all the realms and levels of existence. The Illuminati regarded light as synonymous with wisdom. In optics, it is the sum of all colors, revealed to us through a prism. In cosmology, light’s speed is the upper limit of travel: nothing can exceed it. In biology, it animates not only plants, through photosynthesis, but virtually all organic life.

Perhaps nowhere is the hemispheric cultural divide clearer than in the contrast between the Eastern meditative goal of Enlightenment, a contemplation grasp of the oneness of all things, which stands in stark contradistinction, the West’s eighteenth-century Enlightenment, a collective purging of superstition, error, convention, and faith for the sake of a ceaseless inquiry, a driving empirical rationalism. The latter enterprise is dedicated, so the speak, to the truth of particulars, to facticity over poetry.

Zhang Zhaohui’s signature accomplishment is to bring all these varied, and often conflicting, associations together in solidly composed abstract works that have an eidetic effect on the viewer’s mind. Quantum physics and Song Dynasty landscapes, fleeting impressions and enduring substructures, the cosmological and the microscopic, nature’s linear changes and its cyclical stasis, diffuse illumination and focused, penetrating beams—all these and more are encompassed in Zhang’s art. This painter considers ink art a key contemporary mode of art-making. So what does he depict? Only infinity—and its minutest details.

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