

## **Innovations in Space and Light, A New Forecast**

By Robert C. Morgan

*... how to transfer the old art medium into modern and contemporary art media, how to express new consciousness, and how to make it more accessible to a global audience.*

The above quotation belongs to the perpetually inspired artist Zhang Zhaohui, who many consider one of the truly innovative and perceptive ink painters working in present-day China. I use the word “innovative” because his important idea of bringing ink into water, and conversely, water into ink, is a technique that begets a flat “neutral” surface and is considered essential among avant-garde ink painters. As a result, Zhang’ s abstract approach to ink and wash brings about a vital, exciting, geometric, textural, and intellectually fresh contribution to the field. In the process of painting, he makes use of patterns, repetitions, and optical glyphs that give a unique luster to the surface. His seductive ink washes are applied in a way that is purposefully controlled. Borrowed from his personal artistic language, his paintings are less about ideographs than searching for an interior structure of consciousness. Zhang is interested in giving his paintings an abstract state of mind or what might be called a “void.” At the same time, his desire for painting is that it should appear “accessible” to the viewer in a way that defines its purpose and spiritual authenticity.

Zhang’ s ink-wash paintings possess none of the signs and traces that belong to popular culture. Instead, there is a kind of “emptiness” about his paintings, but in contrast to the work of the more traditional ink painters, Zhang’ s approach to emptiness appears more secular and less focused on the spiritual or intimate concerns of the past as aspired to in the paintings of the southern Song Dynasty. Rather his paintings are more coincident with the absence of the spiritual – that is, the emptiness of emptiness – found in today’ s urban environments in China (and elsewhere), where mindless information is channeled through the social media and posted on street-signs, the kinds of blank or blunt messages seen in the everyday secular world. Zhang’ s ink paintings reject the urban commonality that ordinary people are forced to confront continually in their daily routines lives. His metaphysical approach is more aligned

with a resistance to commonality and is given instead to the possibility of transforming contemporary life into another way of seeing.

Zhang Zhaohui's Light Infinity Series opens our visible consciousness to a type of abstract visual vibration, elegantly mannered and focused on central imagery. His grids buckle, twist and turn through space, directing our eye toward a central source of light. Inevitably, Zhang's ink paintings rest on his expertise in constructing optical forms through linear patterns that suggest "infinity" insofar as these grids might open new doors to perception. His work focuses on the geometric in contrast to the intuitive, or possibly an overlay between the two. I have never quite understood why geometry should not be used in an intuitive way. Zhang appears to understand this. That artist's use of geometry has the option to follow its own logic or to move into realm of the imagination. On the other hand, they have the option to do both. His ink paintings do precisely this.

Zhang's method of painting is both cohesive and resilient. It lends itself to a type of pure optical engagement. In doing so, viewers are able to capture and distill Zhang's optical nuances in terms of a personal vision and a highly reflective network of isolated phenomena occurring simultaneously within the eye and mind, a uniform connection between seeing and thinking. I find this aspect of his work fascinating, especially given the subtle textures and variations that his paintings reveal. The extant differences between his two series of Infinite Light and Linear Light are compelling. Whereas the Linear Light paintings appear more diffuse in their all-over surfaces of light as shown in his repetitive use of linear strokes, the same elements in Infinity Light congeal more towards the center, thus creating a sense of expansion and contraction of light in both directions.

The intensity of thought that abides in the process of constructing a surface of light indirectly relates to the act of seeing and to the embodiment of perception found in the writings of the French phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Although the idea of phenomenology comes from a point of view outside the tradition in which Zhang was raised, scholars from both hemispheres have suggested its affinity to Eastern thought. Relative to the recent ink-wash paintings of Zhang Zhaohui, it offers a parallel point of view contiguous to the thinking of the artist.

As expressed in an essay on Zhang' s paintings, the scholar Zhu Yuze remarks:

“Philosophically, the language of art not only turns its emphasis to the cultural critique of reality, but also stands in constant interaction and communication with the thoughts from phenomenology and cognitive sciences.” For Merleau-Ponty, the expanded sensibility of corporeal perception becomes essential to the process of how the viewer comes to terms with light as the subject matter of painting as described in the French philosopher' s essays on the Post-Impressionist painter Paul Cezanne.

In Merleau-Ponty' s frequently quoted essay titled “Cezanne' s Doubt,” the philosopher attempts to clarify the notion that in the act of painting conception should not precede execution. He states: “There is nothing but a vague fever before the act of artistic expression, and only the work itself, completed and understood, is proof that there was something rather than nothing to be said ... The meaning of what the artist is going to say does not exist anywhere – not in things, which as yet have no meaning, not in the artist himself in his unformulated life.” Curiously, Merleau-Ponty seems critical of Western dualism in his approach to art. Even so, it would be tempting to analyze Zhang' s paintings, both the Infinity Light and Linear Light series, from a Western perspective where the pervasiveness of light is constructed in two ways – either by decentering the light through the repetition of linear elements or through centering the light as it moves gradually from the exterior frame into the interior structure. In either case, one cannot guarantee the aesthetic results. Linguistically, we may understand the difference – but does the language necessarily confirm how the light in Zhang' s paintings actually functions on a sensorial level, thereby giving credibility to the description? Despite the logic involved in this kind of either/or methodology, the predetermined effect remains unpredictable. Rather, one might critically investigate Zhang' s use of light less according to methodological categories than through specific encounters with individual works that avoid presumptuous generalities.

In the struggle for experimental ink-wash painters to come to terms with subtle differences in Eastern and Western sensibilities, the scholar Wen Song, has explained:

“Unlike traditional ink-wash, modern ink-wash paintings are better characterized for [their] emphasis on compositional tension, keeping in line with the general philosophy

of modern art in terms of being individualistic and iconographic.” Wen Song further claims that the turn toward “experimental ink-wash” in the 1980s happened as a result of the influences of modern art imported from the West. This dualistic tendency among the new ink painters was previously unknown in China, thus inciting a split between “Western-derived forms” and “Eastern-originated spirits.” The reconciliation between the two became increasingly problematic for those deeply engaged in experimental ink-wash painting at the time. Many chose either to use the iconography extant in Western art or to embrace “abstraction” as a form of oriental (Confucian) metaphysics. Later, Zhang’s practice would have little difficulty moving from landscape painting in the direction of abstraction whereby he could retain and expand upon the traditional values of his medium within a highly conflicted period in recent Chinese history. The endorsement of the painter by Zhu Yuze becomes significant: “His new ink and wash works explore in the realm of spirit and primitive languages with an intending inquiry for the essence of art, paving the way in search of condensed meaning and crystallized spirit. This is the achievement representing what Zhang has been committed to both intellectually and practically during these years as an artist.”

In another context, Zhu Yuze saw a paradox in relation to political content and metaphysical content in Zhang’s most recent abstract ink-wash paintings. “Art as a form of revolutionary power must be substantiated in internalizing the value of art into the interpretation of its own making, rather than being pushed to the frontline as a leading oppositional force against social unfairness.” A statement follows to the effect that the artist “extols the aesthetics of intellectual and spiritual freedom.” As I understand the language oriented practice of Zhang, who was trained both as a painter and critical scholar, more clarification is needed to explain what Zhu Yuze sees as a conundrum between art and “revolutionary power” in his paintings. To do this, we need to separate the more typical methods of how politics are used, and often misunderstood, in art as a literal or descriptive device rather than as a more open means of thinking within a larger, more operative historical context. I am not certain we can divide these concerns between the hemispheres, especially given the emphasis on the literal meaning of “political art.” certainly in the United States, Eastern Europe, areas of Latin America, that suggests some kind of direct impact coming for the works of

artists committed to removing oppression, including censorship, from the realities of everyday life.

Based on my understanding of Zhang' s recent paintings, I do not see his work as functioning in this kind of direct manner. It is not meant as an agent for something else. "Zhang' s art is not meant to symbolize other concepts," says Zhu Yuze. This suggests that abstraction is in opposition to symbolism and iconography and that it exists for its own formal reasons. Another point of view comes from the Frankfurt School philosopher Herbert Marcuse who denies the existence of "political art" as such. Rather, he argues in favor of those artists who are deeply involved in their work. According to Marcuse, the artist who truly engages in making art is, at the same time, fighting for self-liberation. The artist' s persistence is, in itself, a linguistic sign in defense of freedom, which is also a sign of offense against political oppression.

Zhang Zhaohui has given a considerable degree of attention to his development as an artist and to the values he believes are important as this stage in his career, particularly in defining a future course for the direction of abstraction in his on-going innovations as contemporary ink-wash painter. In response to a question raised in a recent interview concerning his personal methodology in determining a language for ink and wash, Zhang responded: "It was the 'brush and ink' that was predominant in the ink and wash rather than water at first ... in the recent six or seven decades, ink and wash began to surrender to water, yet its usage was often so overtly humid that the texture and luster of water were unfortunately absent ... To retrieve the freedom of water in ink and wash painting is what I believe to be the pathway to better understand the nature of Chinese culture."

The metaphoric resonance that Zhang sees in his art is intrinsic to how and why he works. Every stroke spells out a moment in Chinese history and in his personal history as well. He continues to develop a new language for painting. This is essentially what important artists are expected to do. But every artist needs a heightened awareness of the cultural context in which he or she chooses to work. According to Zhang, "the cultural base is more profound by including appropriate understanding and appreciation of traditional culture, due to respect of traditional humanity." The emphasis on

“traditional humanity” is immeasurably significant to the artist because it reaches deeply into his cultural base. Without those ink painters who came before, and who faithfully practiced their calligraphy and their painting, there could be no genuine avant-garde today. Time and light emanate from the past into the present, For Zhang, luster and gloss, as seen in the texture of his paintings, “denotes a meaning of ‘light reflected on the water’ in Chinese, suggesting something that is universally perpetuated.”

2018-04-21