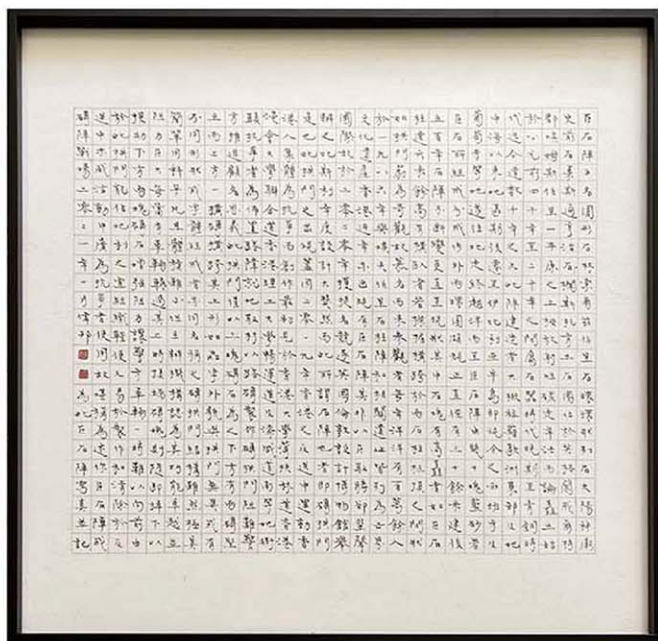


# Pop Rock

OLIVIA WANG



1 Koon Wai Bong  
*Stonehenge*  
2021  
Diptych; each 32.5 x 33.5 cm  
Ink on paper

THE SCHOLAR'S ROCK has been a prized icon throughout Chinese art history. From the Song dynasty (960–1279), large rocks became an essential feature in gardens while smaller ones were kept in private or studio collections. Rocks were considered precious by emperors and leading painters of the day. Today, however, it is no longer simply a rarefied object and preserve of the elite. While it continues to be treasured, contemporary Chinese artists boldly bring the scholar's rock into the living, breathing world of the present. Whether cradled in a skeletal hand, travelling aboard a boat, or sculpted from foam, the rock is alive and well. "Pop Rock", curated by Olivia Wang and Jérémie Thircuir at Alisan Fine Arts in Hong Kong and on view until November 2021, brings together a group of artists who are not afraid to use the rock as political expression, as a vector for irreverent humour, or an object transformed into vibrant colours. The exhibition highlights the diverse exploration and perspective of artists from Hong Kong and China working in a range of different media.

Rocks may not be outwardly political;

but they have swayed kingdoms. Emperor Huizong (reigned 1101–1125) collected so many rocks from all over the country, to embellish his gardens, that he reputedly drained the empire. In recent years, Hong Kong's political atmosphere has become increasingly fraught. Some artists have taken these anxieties as a catalyst for their creative works. Koon Wai Bong (born 1974), a Hong Kong-based artist, uses rocks as a vector for political expression. *Stonehenge* (2021) (1) depicts the bricks, known as "mini-Stonehenges", used as roadblocks during the city's recent protests. Koon has said that although the assemblages were formed on the streets, they meet the aesthetic criteria for appreciating rocks. The brushwork and calligraphy are delicate and refined, reflecting years of training and studying of past master painters. Koon likewise follows the classical practice of unifying painting, poetry and calligraphy in a single image. The inscription weaves the history of the original Stonehenge monument in England with the events that unfolded across Hong Kong during the protests.

Rocks can entrance and bedazzle. When

Mi Fu (1051–1107), the scholar, calligrapher and renowned petrologist came across a rock, he was so taken by its power and beauty that he bowed deeply to it, addressing it as "Elder Brother". The incident became one of the best-loved stories of "stone-lore" and has since been portrayed in ink paintings by many artists. Contemporary artists, too, mix veneration, wit and playfulness. Shanghai-based Zhang Jian-Jun (born 1955), a pioneer of abstract art in China, has from the early 2000s developed a series of rock sculptures. In *Scholar Rock (The Mirage Garden)* (2) (2008), Zhang moulded a *taihu* garden rock in translucent, bright purple-pink silicone rubber. With a textured, unctuous surface, and standing over two metres tall, the piece is certainly attention-grabbing and could even be considered grotesque. The artist has described the work as a collision of cultures that is modern China.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, it was his intention to stimulate dialogue between tradition and modernity. His reimagination of a rock is equally inventive in *Ink Garden of Re-Creation*, an installation exhibited at the 2002 Shanghai Biennale. It featured a group of *taihu* rocks made of solid, hardened





2 Zhang Jian-Jun  
*Scholar Rock (The Mirage Garden)*  
 2008  
 196 x 135 x 87 cm  
 Silicone rubber  
 Exhibited: *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China*,  
 The Astor Chinese Garden Court, The Metropolitan Museum  
 of Art, New York  
 Sigg Collection

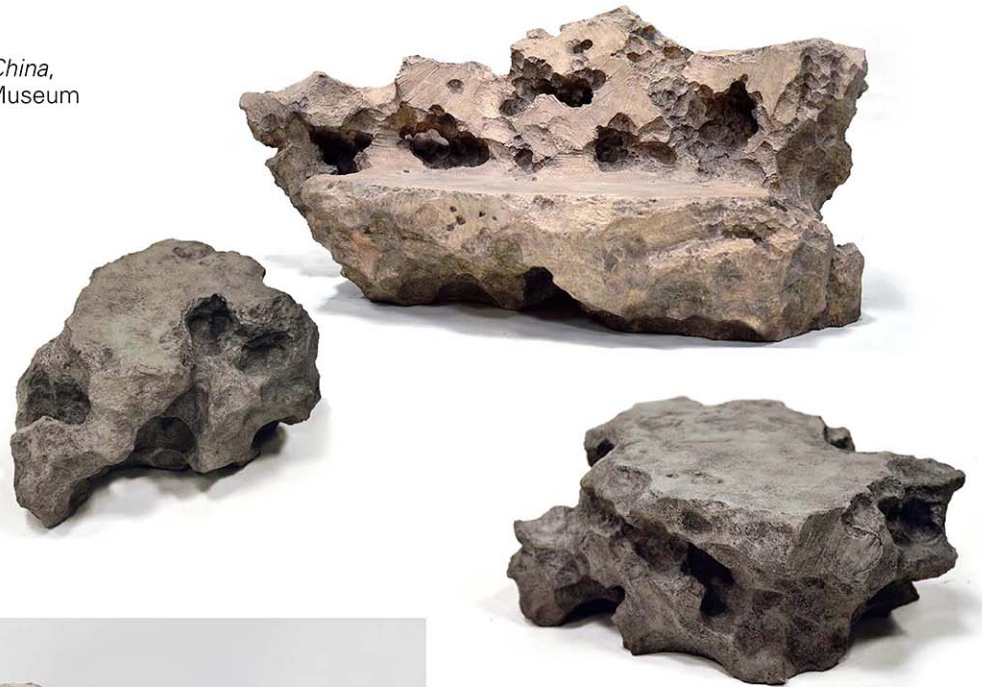
ink. The central one measured over three metres in height, and arranged around it were three smaller ones, each encased in a glass container through which water flowed from the interior, gradually dissolving the rock and blackening the water surrounding it.<sup>2</sup> While Zhang's deployment of ink pays homage to Chinese artistic tradition, the ink's gradual dissipation and transformation addresses the changing times within a global context. Both works fit within Zhang's wide-ranging artistic practice, which at its core engages with notions of existence, as well as the interactions between humanity and nature, tradition and contemporaneity.

Not to be outdone in playful wit, Hubei-born sculptor Shi Jinsong (born 1969) constructs rocks not out of solid materials, but out of pliable springy foam. Shi is known for his mixed-media installations and sculptures that express the complexities brought about by globalisation and consumerism in 21st

<sup>1</sup>Maxwell K. Hearn, *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013, p. 174.

<sup>2</sup>Robert C. Morgan, "Zhang Jian-Jun: Memory and the Process of Historical Time", in *Yishu*, Vol. 6, no. 3, September 2007, p. 59.

3 Shi Jinsong  
*Garden In The Living Room*  
 2021  
 Fire retardant and eco-friendly foam



4 Dong Wensheng  
*Skeleton Rock*  
 2007  
 100 x 120 cm  
 Archival inkjet print





5 Dong Wensheng  
*Yidam*  
2007  
100 x 120 cm  
Archival inkjet print



6 Dong Wensheng  
*The Moment of Stone Sinking*  
2007  
Video  
27 mins

century China. His tongue-in-cheek style is encapsulated in his renderings of consumer objects, such as a baby's carriage, rattle and rocking horse, crafted using stainless steel and replete with razor-sharp blades. However, he takes the converse approach in *Garden In The Living Room* (2021) (3), where he replicates the craggy surface texture and perforations of rocks in a form that can be used as a comfy sofa set. The result is at once dissonant and humorous.

Rocks are otherworldly. Objects for meditation, they were believed to be imbued with supernatural energies. Jiangsu-born Dong Wensheng (born 1970) exposes the uncanny in his photography works. Appearing in various guises, the rock is a reoccurring motif in his oeuvre. In *Skeleton Rock* (2007) (4), a *taihu* rock is held in a skeletal palm. There is something unsettling about the textures of the two objects, which appear to mirror each other, although the artist prefers to leave interpretation to the viewer. Dong stated that the composition resulted from a moment of serendipity. He had acquired the skeletal specimen, but while its time-worn texture appealed to him, he was unsure what to do with it. One day, he realised that the knuckles could be bent: the cradled space was inviting, and Dong decided to place a small rock from his own collection within it. In *Yidam* (2007) (5), Dong presents a human skull covered in fresh moss and flowers. Here, there is no rock. However, the composition resembles a traditional, cultivated *penjing*, in which a miniature rock and tree were often placed, symbolising the essence of the natural world. The skull, like the skeletal hand before it, inevitably serves as a memento mori on mortality and life after death. Reflections on mortality lead to thoughts of nature, to which we all return. Dong documents the life journey of a monumental *taihu* rock in the video, *The Moment of Stone Sinking* (2007) (6), after it is removed from modern civilisation. The rock is up-



7 Pan Yingguo  
*Three Stones I*  
2020  
90 x 160 cm  
Oil on canvas

rooted by a crane, and then transported by a truck to a wooden boat on a lake. It is then cast into the water, sinking to the bottom, where it returns to the subterranean quarries from where it originated. When released back into nature, the rock sheds the cultural associations with which it was previously charged with.

Pan Yingguo (born 1985), a Chongqing-based artist, examines the relationship between humans and nature in today's world of hyperreality in his oil-on-canvas, *Three Stones I* (2020) (7). Nearly two metres wide, the work depicts three rocks bathed in warm, glowing sunlight. According to Pan, one day last spring, as he was staring at his collection of stones that he picked up many years ago in the Yangtse river, the afternoon sun suddenly blazed through the window. The tranquility of his studio was disrupted, but

inspiration struck. Pan rendered this painting, using perspective and detailed shading in realist style. This is a daring foray, as representation of rocks has been closely linked to the ink painting tradition. Using slowly applied layers of oil paint in rich, earthy tones against a mottled background, the scene is imbued with a sensitivity shaped by his practice as a figurative painter. To him, the rock is a vehicle through which to self-reflect and to explore notions of time and space.

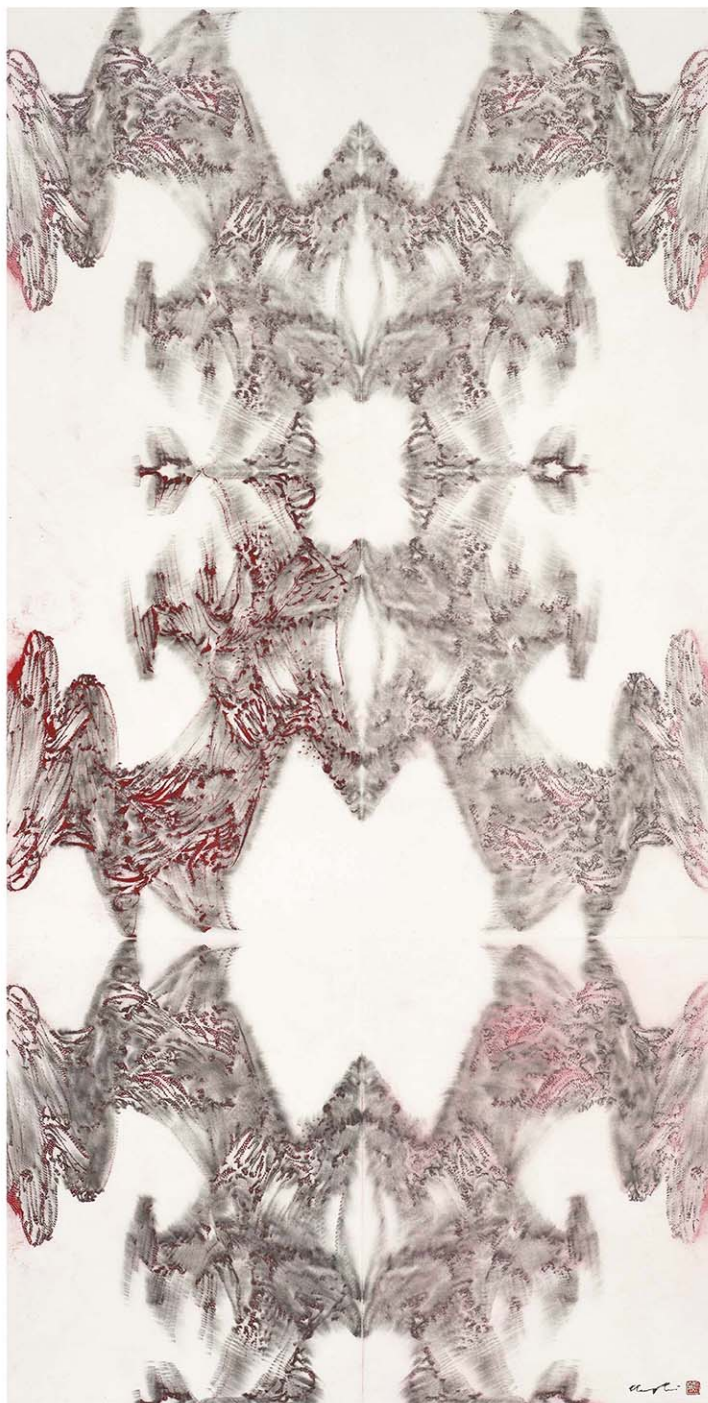
As Hong Kong-based Hung Fai (born 1988) shows, innovation is possible within Chinese aesthetic and philosophical traditions. In his ink-on-paper work, *The Six Principles of Chinese Painting—Transmission XX* (2020) (8), Hung first invited his father and notable ink painter, Hung Hoi (born 1957), to paint a rock in cinnabar red on a folded



sheet of paper. Hung Fai then saturated the paper with water and traced the contours with a black ink pen. The result, upon unfolding the sheet, is a complex kaleidoscopic image no longer bearing resemblance to the original rock. Hung has deconstructed and transformed his father's rock into an abstract, multilayered image. As the red and black ink seep through the paper, overlapping in some areas and duplicating in others, Hung draws our attention to the dynamics between master and apprentice, father and son, past and present.

Another Hong Kong-based artist working in the medium of ink is Yau Wing Fung (born 1990). He is inspired by master painter Guo Xi's (circa 1000–circa 1090) observation that the landscape is naturally in a state of motion (山形步步移 “the form of the mountain changing with each step”... 山形面面看 “the form of a mountain viewed on every face”<sup>3</sup>). However, Yau takes the concept further in his abstract rock and landscape paintings, which began after a chance encounter several years ago with a certain rock on a walk in the Kowloon Walled City Park. He recalls that he was so struck by a “huge and grotesque rock” standing in the middle of the garden, “clouded coincidentally between the smog and fog”, that he immediately bought pen and paper to sketch it. Rocks have since been an important subject matter for him. In *Riding Mist XV* (2020) (9), which measures nearly two metres across, Yau does the unthinkable for traditional landscape paintings. He splits the elements within the rocks and reconfigures them into a multi-grid structure. He also deploys a unique aerial point of view, which according to the artist, derives from his interests in technology and satellite imagery. There is tension between

<sup>3</sup>Kuo Hsi, “The Significance of Landscape”, in Susan Bush and Hsio-yen Shih, *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985, pp. 150–156.



8  
Hung Fai  
*The Six Principles of Chinese Painting - Transmission XX*  
(with Hung Hoi)  
2020  
139 x 70 cm  
Ink and colour on paper



9  
Yau Wing Fung  
*Riding Mist XV*  
2020  
96 x 179 cm  
Ink and colour on paper





10 Wai Pong-yu  
*A Moment of Truth 58*  
 2021  
 97.5 x 63 cm  
 Ballpoint pen on paper

the abstracted forms of the rock shrouded in swirling clouds and mist, and the precise grid structure. The spatial arrangement, together with skilled brushwork blended with a vivid, icy blue-grey palette, offers a novel way in which to behold a rock.

Rocks were believed to possess the essence of energy and life, capable of dynamic transformations. With no starting or end point, the abstract properties of a rock serve as a foil for artists during their creative processes. Wai Pong-yu (born 1982), a Hong Kong-based artist, merges segments from plants, rocks and the human body in his intricate ballpoint pen drawings on paper. Using his signature fluid lines to render *A Moment of Truth 58* (2021) (10), the artist has seemingly and effortlessly coalesced the disparate elements in striking harmony. Embedded within the intimate, delicate composition, however, are deeper concerns. He elucidates that the “semblance of these disparate beings” reminds him of “how equality lingers in a society predominated by partiality and



11 Ryan LaBar  
*Opening The Hara*  
 2019  
 62 x 42 x 31 cm  
 Porcelain

discrimination.” He states: “Regardless of how simple the wish for an utopia it seems, [the image] looks like an uncanny drifting fossil, or a stack of toppling rocks at its fleeting stability.”

In contrast, the fluidity of the rock is manifested in the abstract, virtuosic porcelain sculptures by Jingdezhen-based artist Ryan LaBar (born 1975). Introduced to the concept of rocks shortly after moving to China from the United States nearly six years ago, LaBar has often compared his sculptures to scholars’ rocks, saying: “They are objects that open the mind, inviting contemplation, abstract in form, dancing between material and space. Both embody the transformational processes.” An example is the white-glazed *Opening The Hara* (2019) (11), which comprises individual and wheel-thrown elements. The production involved a labour-intensive process in which the artist assembled the parts together to form an elaborate woven structure before placing it in a firing kiln. As the heat of the kiln melted the clay and glaze,

the once precariously-stacked components softened and settled into a stable, composite piece. As the forms twist, bend and interact with each other, the final, dynamic matrix reflects the tension and harmony found between the individual components.

Traditional rock enthusiasts might initially be shocked by the myriad ways that these artists have reimagined the object. However, amid the bright colours, wide range of different media, and sometimes irreverent approach, they would no doubt recognise and appreciate the enduring love and obsession that contemporary artists have for the rock. A petrologist would not be left stony-faced.

*Olivia Wang is an independent writer and curator based in Hong Kong. She is the Director and Producer of Unsung Heroes of Ink (2020), a short documentary on the role of paper in ink painting. She is a representative of the Ink Society and is also on the panel of judges for the UOB Art in Ink Award.*