

THE WEIGHT OF LIGHTNESS

INK ART AT M+

“The Weight of Lightness” was M+’s first presentation of ink art from its collection. Demonstrating the expansive approach that the institution has undertaken with regard to ink-based practices, the showcase featured paintings, calligraphy, installations, photography and moving-image works by 42 artists from more than 10 countries, spanning the 1950s to the present.

The ambitious show was mounted at M+ Pavilion. Fitting 57 works in the snug, 880-square-meter space could have resulted in a jumble, but curator Lesley Ma created a cohesive narrative. “By making existing boundaries more porous through this exhibition,” Ma stated, “we show how ink art . . . possesses boundless potential.”

This method was most palpable in the first thematic section, which drew parallels between artists from different geographic locations who have used the formal, gestural and intuitive qualities of calligraphic strokes to express their artistic impulses. For example, the distinguished calligrapher Tong Yang-Tze’s stunning, eight-and-a-half-meter-wide *Spirited, Like a Far-journeying Steed; Floating, Like a Duck on Water* (2002), reveals how the artist’s powerful brushstrokes push the written word toward abstraction. Ink-on-paper works by Morita Shiryu and Hidai Nankoku—artists who revolutionized calligraphy in postwar Japan by similarly eschewing legible characters—dialogued with iconic, monochromatic canvases by Park Seo-bo and Lee Ufan. Of note was the unusual juxtaposition of four paintings that jumped from China to India to the United States, and which included the young American Nick Mauss’s 2002 glazed abstract painting on a flat piece of ceramic.

The next theme in the show was centered around common symbols such as mountains, trees, rocks and plants, and conveyed myriad convictions and emotions. *Distant Thoughts No. 19* (1990) was painted when Wucius Wong, a proponent of the Hong Kong New Ink Movement of the 1960s, lived in New Jersey. Synthesizing Western techniques of light and shadow, modern graphic design and traditional Chinese landscape painting, the work depicts the Englewood Cliffs along the Hudson River, reflecting Wong’s view at the time. Close by, Zhang Yanzi’s album of 12 leaves offered an intimate visual experience. Rendered in Zhang’s signature delicate brushwork, *Tianwang Buxin Dan* (2014–15) portrays the plants and roots that make up a Chinese medicinal prescription meant to “nourish the heart” and relieve stress-related anxiety. By referencing each ingredient’s traditional, richly symbolic name, Zhang connects with ancient values and wisdom.

The way that ink art is “endowed with the weight of traditions and invigorated by the lightness of its material” was particularly apparent in the final section of the exhibition, which explored the



medium’s philosophical dimensions. Many of the featured artists had received rigorous training in ink painting, yet have forged modes of expression beyond dogmatic practices. For example, the work of Dansaekhwa artist Kwon Young-woo, from circa 1982, is devoid of any physical trace of ink. Kwon, who trained in Chinese ink, focused instead on Korean paper—conventionally seen as canvas for the liquid—and used a knife to form vertical tears and flaps on the surface, imbuing the work with a three-dimensional presence. Nearby, an installation by Ni Youyu comprised flattened coins affixed to three sides of the wall. Each coin in *Galaxy* (2010–11) had been painstakingly painted with landscapes, human anatomy and other objects, and the constellation of “stars” floated weightlessly, inviting the viewer to meditate upon a suspended moment in time and space.

The larger works in the show, such as Lui Shou-kwan’s *Zen* (1970) and Tong Yang-Tze’s calligraphy, could have benefitted from more breathing space. Nonetheless, the exhibition’s format succeeded in guiding viewers through diverse themes and narratives in ink art. Furthermore, the transcultural viewpoint of the presentation was something of a breakthrough, as, to date, most surveys of the genre focus on Chinese or East Asian artists. As cultural boundaries increasingly blur and artists look outside their own traditions and disciplines for inspiration, it will be intriguing to see if and how M+’s approach will impact the way in which other institutions and curators conceptualize ink art.

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