

Introduction Zheng Chongbin: Layering Views

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Over the course of his career spanning more than three decades, Zheng Chongbin has garnered critical acclaim for his radical interpretations of the classical ink painting form. His unique visual language reflects his bicultural education and sensibility. Born in Shanghai in 1961, Zheng trained as an ink painter at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou where he specialised in traditional figure painting. In 1989, he was awarded an international fellowship to study at the San Francisco Art Institute. He received his MFA in installation and conceptual art. Shortly after completing his graduate studies, Zheng settled in the San Francisco Bay Area, where he has been based since. His art training and life experiences have infused his art with a syncretic mix of Eastern and Western cultures and philosophies.

Zheng's oeuvre has evolved over the years — from his biomorphic ink paintings of the late 1980s that straddle the figurative and abstract, and his subsequent ink and white acrylic abstractions on paper, to his more recent explorations into the media of installation and video. While his art draws from Western artistic principles, he maintains focused on probing into the notion held by the pre-modern Chinese, who in Zheng's words — “saw the world as made up of processes in flux” and that “the natural, inorganic world of energy and matter is living and always changing.” Zheng's manifestations in art draw viewers into an otherworldly yet unexpectedly familiar realm evocative of the rhythms and structures of the natural world.

This exhibition, entitled *Layering Views*, showcases Zheng's newest light-and-space installation conceived especially for Ruyi149, abstract works from his most recent series, and a selection of key earlier ink paintings dating back to the late-1980s. The eponymous installation demonstrates his ongoing engagement with the medium of light. Deeply inspired by the natural light and environment of Northern California, as well as in the Light and Space movement of the mid-1960s, Zheng's practice brings forth the materiality of light and probes how it can manipulate human perception. Illuminated by only natural light, *Layering Views* comprises three makeshift walls framed around the window in the gallery's second-floor space. The configuration of the work creates the illusion that, when the viewer enters the square-shaped gallery, the outside view through the window and shape of window is seemingly changing in appearance. A mesh scrim articulates the front wall, disorienting our experience of the space.

Zheng's approach and deployment of light is also conveyed in *Double Plains* (2014), a painting composed of two vertical panes that appear to both shift towards and away from each other in dynamic tension. The paper has been heavily saturated with dense, black ink, creating a wrinkled, textured surface that takes on a sculptural presence. The work itself appears to generate light, with its varying hues of black — from matte to glossy, to dry to iridescent — subtly shifting according to the light conditions and the viewer's position. The sensory effect is absorbing.

We can trace Zheng's path towards his current practice by examining pieces generated early on in his artistic career. Already displaying a strong experimental spirit in his mid-20s, *Instrument 4* (1986) and *Instrument 5* (1987) are ink-on-paper works that Zheng created as he moved away from traditional figural painting to abstraction. Spanning nearly two metres in height, each features biomorphic formations executed with powerful, gestural and almost violent brushstrokes. It was during this period that Zheng began blending monochromatic ink with white acrylic to enrich the painted texture on the xuan paper. This was to become his signature palette. In addition, instead of a traditional, soft-haired brush (*maobi* 毛筆), Zheng adopted a wide, less flexible brush (*paibi* 排筆) commonly used in mounting paintings, thus breaking away from the constraints of tradition.

Zheng's oeuvre moved further towards abstraction with his subsequent *Blot* series (1997-2002). Taking a more conceptual approach from his earlier works, the series extended upon Shi Tao's (1642–1707) handscroll entitled *10,000 Ugly Ink Dots* (萬點惡墨), a work composed entirely of a mass of dots — a fundamental component of traditional ink painting. Zheng isolated the dot in *Blot 1* (1998) and *Blot 2* (1998), exploring its properties and imbuing it with texture and depth. Larger works from this series are composed of repetitive blots arranged in a grid-like structure, often overlapping and bleeding into one another.

In the mid-2000s, Zheng diverged from the dot to abstract works rendered with linear brushwork in a more freeform style. An example is *Slanted Line* (2012), a work from a series he refers to as “white ink” that considers the qualities of acrylic and its interplay with ink. Although not from the same series, Zheng further emphasizes the tensions between the

two materials in *Desert* (2015).

Zheng also began more actively manipulating the structure of the paper using techniques including collage, paper-folding, cutting, tearing and soaking. Working on the floor of his studio, the process often begins by first laying out fragments of paper and considering their configuration. He then paints on the overlapping fragments, shifting and rotating them before the final process of mounting. This is encapsulated in the large-scale *Four Corners* (2015), where geometries are created by the angles and straight edges. Although not Zheng's intention, the interactions of the ink, acrylic, water and paper generate an aesthetic that resembles forms from the natural world, from blood vessels and neurons, to tree branches, snow-capped mountain cliffs and frozen lakes.

Zheng's latest ink-and-acrylic innovations continue to investigate abstraction and perception. Formed by more modules than previous pieces, the works display intricate compositional structures. In works such as *Site 1* (2019), the tightly choreographed fragments generate intense kinetic energy, as if they could at any moment burst out from the confines of the paper surface.

This exhibition offers the opportunity to observe the ways in which Zheng Chongbin has reconceptualized and transformed the role of ink as a medium. The works testify to his indefatigable desire throughout his career to innovate and experiment with new forms, materials and media to create a highly original artistic language. To behold Zheng's art is an immersive experience and will likely leave us with a changed sense of perception, unveiling hidden dimensions in his art, and perhaps in ourselves as well.