

Hong Kong's Ink-lings: Four Millennials to Watch

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Hong Kong artists have received a growing level of attention in recent years. Galleries are devoting more of their programmes to promoting local artists; auction houses are including more Hong Kong artists in their contemporary art sales. Last year, the inaugural exhibition at the M+ Pavilion presented a site-specific installation by local talent Tsang Kin-Wah (b. 1976). The city's steadily growing commercial scene of art fairs, galleries and auction houses has undoubtedly offered its artists many more opportunities to exhibit their work.

Young Hong Kong ink artists, in the past overshadowed by their mainland counterparts, are now also slowly gaining recognition. Indeed, Hong Kong has played a seminal role in the development of ink art. While the evolution of art in mainland China suffered during the years of political turmoil from the 1950s until after the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), the Hong Kong art scene thrived in an atmosphere of artistic freedom. As a former British colony where East and West converged, Hong Kong has spawned artists whose work is unconstrained by

any particular artistic tradition. One of the city's pre-eminent mid-20th century artists and the initiator of the New Ink Painting movement, Lui Shou-kwan (1919–75), was a pioneer in reinterpreting traditional ink painting as a contemporary art form. His contributions, both as a practitioner and as an educator, have had a considerable impact on the ink artists who have followed. Artists such as Lui, Liu Guosong (b. 1932), Wucius Wong (b. 1936) and Irene Chou (1924–2011), whose iconic oeuvre was born out of the ink movements of the late 1960s, have dominated the commercial market. Koon Wai Bong (b. 1974) stands out among the younger generation and has garnered considerable acclaim for his work, which is rooted in Chinese painting traditions and yet contemporary in its expression and vision (Fig. 1). Today, curators, critics—and collectors—are all eager to discover new young artists with talent.

So who are the young artists who are taking up the baton to continue the ink-painting legacy? Born in the 1980s, they grew up in a globalized culture and in an era eclipsed by the approaching handover of the colony to China in 1997. The four artists featured in this article are all graduates of the Department of Fine Arts at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, where an equal emphasis is placed on Chinese and Western art, history and aesthetics. Most had

little knowledge or experience of ink painting until they entered higher education, and yet each has chosen to forge his or her distinctive artistic voice while referencing a certain aspect of this tradition. Collectively, they have discovered ways to express the 'spirit' of ink while engaging with realities that resonate with a universal audience. Using their own artistic vocabularies, they have extended the possibilities in ink painting. Discussing just four artists, however, this article does not reflect the complete landscape of creative talent in Hong Kong.

It was during his third year at university that Wai Pong-yu (b. 1982) found his artistic voice and style. He recalls that one day, while doodling in the library, he was drawn to a small part of his sketch that comprised a dense group of lines. He decided to expand the lines to fill a sheet of paper, which was the start of an ongoing exploration in his career. Wai has since made a name for himself with his meticulous and abstract ballpoint-pen-on-paper drawings, and the collections of Oxford's Ashmolean Museum and the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco both include examples of his work.

Wai's drawings of lines—the fundamental component in Chinese calligraphy and ink painting—have a strong flavour of tradition. He says that just as the literati artist used the brush line as a



Fig. 1 *Whispering Pines*
By Koon Wai Bong (b. 1974), 2015
Pentptych, ink on paper, each: 61 x 78 cm
Private collection



Fig. 2 *Sunset Heart Sutra*
By Wai Pong-yu (b. 1982), 2009
Ballpoint pen on paper, 91 x 136.3 cm
Private collection

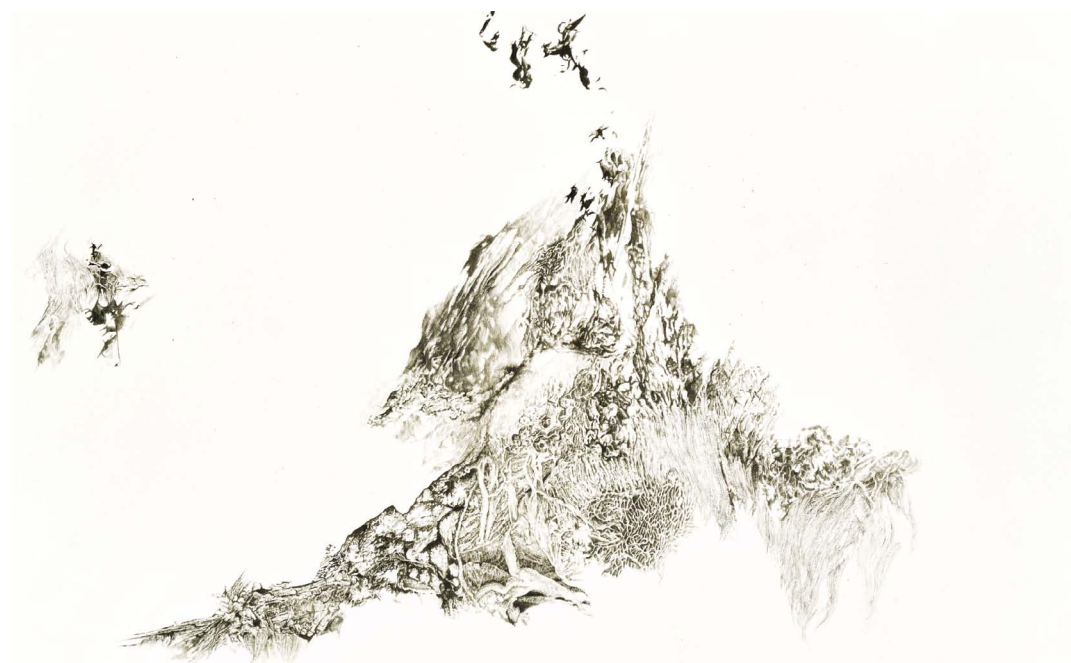


Fig. 3 *A Moment of Truth 46*
By Wai Pong-yu (b. 1982), 2016
Ink and brush on paper,
60.7 x 97.8 cm
Collection of the artist

vehicle to convey experiences and values, he has sought to infuse his emotions into his work via the ballpoint pen (author's interview with Wai Pong-yu, 20 February 2017). His overall approach is markedly contemporary. Wai bases his work on the rhythms and movements of lines, whereby each line follows the previous one in a parallel direction, always moving forward without retracing itself or breaking. He has described this painstaking process as the 'mechanical drawing of the unconsciousness' (*Ceaseless Lines* [solo exhibition catalogue], Grotto Fine Art, 2009, foreword). *Sunset Heart Sutra* (2009), for instance, spans over 1 metre in width and took three months to complete (Fig. 2). Up close the visual intricacy is dizzying, whereas from afar viewers are drawn into a meditative realm of undulating patterns formed of lines and dots.

Wai's subsequent 'Moment of Truth' series, produced since 2011, also explores line, but here he focuses on its 'destruction' and 'corruption'. The natural world lies at its core. In this series he merges segments of the human body with elements from nature, creating abstract images that we may interpret as mountains and landscapes. Wai prefers to view these drawings as 'visual experiences that enable us to enter unthinkable landscapes'. In *A Moment of Truth 46* (2016), Wai fuses 'boiling mud popping from a volcano' and 'icy cliff formations' with 'a plexus of nerves', 'tree bark' and a microscopic view of a 'moon crater' (Fig. 3). While most of his works are drawn with ballpoint pen, this one was executed using Chinese ink and brush. Wai notes that the subtleties of the ink tones produce a softer effect, and thus this work represents the 'flesh' of the series in contrast to the 'bone' of the ballpoint pen drawings.

Another interesting dimension to Wai's practice is his drawings created in response to current events and global contemporary reality. This strong political consciousness can also be seen in the oeuvre of the next two artists discussed here. Wai's series 'Dauntlessly - Charlie Buddha' (2015-) was created in response to the assassinations of the Charlie Hebdo cartoonists in Paris. In these drawings, the Buddha—an icon that has captivated Wai since earlier that year when, during an online

search, he came across and was moved by a 1st–2nd century schist standing Buddha from Gandhara at Tokyo's National Museum—is portrayed with damaged features and contours. In *Dauntlessly - Charlie Buddha 2* (2015), the figure holds in its right hand a copy of a *Charlie Hebdo* magazine dripping with blood, and in its left hand, a pencil (Fig. 4). Half of its face is depicted as damaged and is obscured, communicating feelings of anger, pain and suffering.



Fig. 4 *Dauntlessly - Charlie Buddha 2*,
By Wai Pong-yu (b. 1982), 2015
Ballpoint pen on paper, 100 x 61 cm

While Wai makes his art with the ballpoint pen, Hung Fai (b. 1988) has chosen a unique mode of expression: the ink pen. His path has been different. The son of the noted ink painter Hung Hoi (b. 1957), whose father is also a practitioner of ink painting, the young Hung has an artistic pedigree. He grew up surrounded by ink, brushes and his father's traditional landscapes depicting the Chinese mountains Huangshan and Huashan. His ambition to become an artist was 'very natural' (author's interview with Hung Fai, 20 February 2017). However, at the age of 10 Hung grew determined to forge a creative language independent of his father's, after reading how the Romanian artist Constantin Brancusi (1876–1957), despite his great admiration for the French sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840–1917), left the master's studio after only two months, explaining that 'nothing grows under big trees'. Throughout his teenage years, Hung rebelled against and rejected the artistic tradition he was brought up in—for the most part because he felt intimidated and burdened by it. It was not until he entered university, having experimented with a multitude of different media including sculpture and video, that he realized he was in fact increasingly drawn to the expressive potential of ink. 'Ink is in my blood,' he adds.

Using ink as his medium, then, Hung began to develop his own technique, in which he deconstructs the three elements in Chinese painting—paper, water and ink—and then manipulates and reconstructs them. He begins the elaborate process by heavily saturating a sheet of *xuan* paper (the paper

traditionally used in Chinese painting) with water, and then folds the paper into many sections. While it is still wet, he uses an ink pen rather than a Chinese brush to methodically place his ink marks, letting them diffuse spontaneously into the paper.

Techniques aside, there are strong conceptual motivations in Hung's work. While seemingly meditative and serene, the series 'Wild Grass' (2014) was inspired by Lu Xun (1881–1936)—in particular, by the literary master's prose poem collection of the same name, which delves into the social ills of his day. *Wild Grass I*, nearly 3 metres in width, comprises hundreds of horizontal lines delineated by individual ink dots (Fig. 5). Hung explains that the physical act of using a heavy ruler to line up the dots across the paper is, in fact, violent. 'The marks of ink represent people in society, where individuals are so oppressed that they diffuse and gradually fade,' he says.

In a subsequent series, which probes his relationship with the ink painting tradition, Hung invited his father to collaborate with him. The ongoing series 'Transmission' (2016–) ambitiously rethinks the 'Liu fa' (the so-called 'Six Principles'), a 6th century treatise laid down by the art theorist Xie He on the ideals of Chinese painting. In *The Six Principles of Chinese Painting - Transmission XI* (2017), Hung asked his father to paint a landscape in cinnabar red, a colour symbolic of authority (Fig. 6). He then traced the landscape with ink dots using several layers of saturated paper—reinterpreting Xie He's sixth canon, *chuanyi moxie* ('transmission

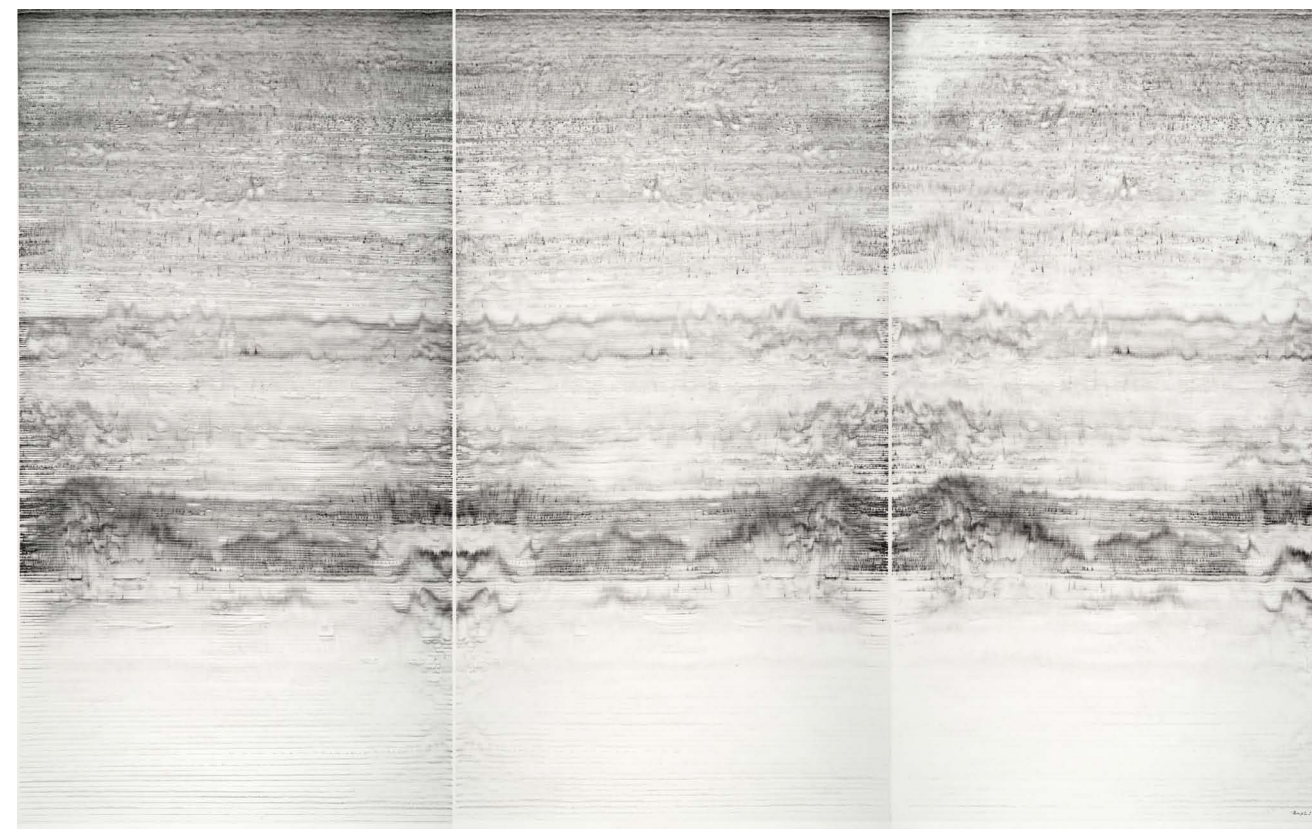


Fig. 5 *Wild Grass I*
By Hung Fai (b. 1988), 2014
Triptych, ink on paper, each: 180 x 97 cm
Private collection

Fig. 6 *The Six Principles of Chinese Painting - Transmission XI*
By Hung Fai (b. 1988), with Hung Hoi (b. 1957), 2017
Ink and colour on paper, each: 136 x 69 cm



by copying'), but also upending the very tradition of transmitting knowledge from master to apprentice. The ink penetrated through the layers, each layer appearing more faded than the next. On the final layer in this set of twelve, Hung asked his father to paint another landscape in red, based on the diffused traces left in the paper. Through this work, Hung has found a way to reconcile his emotions towards tradition—and his father—with contemporaneity.

New methods and techniques can also be seen in the mixed-media practice of Ling Pui Sze (b. 1989). In a research project for her A-level in visual art, Ling discovered and was moved by the

works of Wucius Wong. Thus, it was all the more exciting and meaningful when, in her final year at university, she was able to take his ink painting course, which was offered only once every 3 years. Wong's artistic vision has had a profound influence on Ling. Always encouraging his students to cross boundaries during the creative process, Wong would bring different materials and media to class for his students to experiment with. One day, he brought some inkjet printed paper patterned with irregular dots, which Ling likened to human cells. Fascinated by science and the building blocks of life, she began inkjet-printing magnified cell images onto *xuan* paper, tearing them by hand into small pieces and then recomposing them as a collage on stretched



Fig. 7 *Form 3*
By Ling Pui Sze (b. 1989), 2013
Mixed media on canvas, 120 x 120 cm
Collection of the artist



Fig. 8 *Warrior 1*
By Ling Pui Sze (b. 1989), 2016
Video, mixed media on paper and bamboo, dimensions variable
Collection of the artist

canvas—a process she calls a 'free-style puzzle with unlimited pieces' ('Beyond the Brush: Discussion with Ling Pui Sze and Wai Pong-yu', Ink Asia, 20 December 2015). In the final stage of creation, she may also spray water onto the collage and embellish it with ink and brush. The result is a complex and abstract work that she describes as 'the start of a new organism'. Following her graduation, Ling continued to develop this series of mixed-media work, 'It All Begins in the Sea' (2012–15). *Form 3* (2013) is an exploration of water (Fig. 7). While it may evoke an abstract, ethereal ink landscape, the work is a collage composed of different types of water cells—liquid, gas and solid.

Ling has always been inspired by nature, from small, strange-looking insects to marine organisms and plants. In her latest series, which was shown in a group exhibition at Hong Kong's Aishonanzuka gallery earlier this year, she delves more deeply into phenomena from the natural world. Breaking the mould of two-dimensional collage paintings, *Warrior 1* (2016) consists of a video showing a bizarre underwater scene where a fish swims trapped inside a jellyfish, and a bamboo sculpture covered in collaged paper portraying the ocean; a fish made of moulded *xuan* paper appears suspended above (Fig. 8). Here, Ling questions the concept of control and being controlled, leaving it to the viewer to



Fig. 9 *Box with Loft*
By Zhang Xiaoli (b. 1989), 2015
Ink and colour on silk, 50 x 50 cm
Private collection



Fig. 10 *A Bag of Landscape*
By Zhang Xiaoli (b. 1989), 2015
Ink and colour on silk, 50 x 50 cm
Private collection



Fig. 11 *In Between*
By Zhang Xiaoli (b. 1989), 2016
Ink and colour on silk, diameter 22 cm
Collection of the artist

decide which of the two organisms in the video is the predator. She comments that this complex relationship is something she sees not only in her daily life, but also in the interaction between Hong Kong and mainland China (author's interview with Ling Pui Sze, 21 February 2017).

While Ling's art already embodies a strong sense of social responsibility, she says she will continue to explore ways in which to develop the spirit of ink in her practice. To her, this spirit goes beyond the use of ink and brush to express the intimate relation between humankind and the natural world. This longing for communion with nature lies at the core of classical Chinese landscape painting. As we can see in her work so far, she has breathed new life and awareness into this tradition.

Last but not least, among the four artists, the ink paintings of Zhang Xiaoli (b. 1989) are ostensibly more 'traditional'. She employs the *gongbi* ('fine line') style as her expressive means. Considered the most conservative brush technique, with its precise, refined lines *gongbi* was highly valued by the court for its closely descriptive portrayal of the physical world. Many ink artists today excel at utilizing *gongbi* to create figural or narrative works that embody contemporary themes. Zhang has emerged with a distinctive personal style.

Zhang's path to a career in art has not been without obstacles. As a child she was skilled at painting, and like many in her generation, enjoyed manga and drawing cartoons. But throughout her childhood, her parents discouraged her from pursuing art and pressured her to study maths and science. Zhang's dream of studying art was revived at university, where she minored in Fine Art, and she eventually went on to complete a full arts degree after finishing her degree in Biology. It was only after she received two prestigious awards at her graduation show that her parents began to support her career choice.

In the final year of her arts degree, Zhang painted a series of ink-and-colour landscapes that assimilate archaic and contemporary elements, but with a twist. Her graduation work, *A Copy of Handscroll Landscape of Shen Zhou* (2014), was a monumental painting over 5 metres in length inspired by the 15th–16th century literatus, who was one of her favourite painters. Here, she has replaced all the elements in the Chinese landscape painting—trees, mountains, rocks and figures—with depictions of Lego bricks.

Incorporating these toy building blocks, Zhang seeks to create an art that dialogues with tradition.

Zhang has developed her Lego paintings in her ongoing series 'Boxed Landscape' (2015–) (Fig. 9). Painted in ink and colour on silk, the series portrays surreal scenes of Lego landscapes emerging from everyday objects such as cabinets, suitcases and a desk. Following her graduation she lived an itinerant life, moving flats and studios every couple of months before finally electing a year ago to leave Hong Kong and settle in Beijing. Zhang explains that each scene represents a memory of a different place, each disconnected from the others and safely preserved in a box. *A Bag of Landscape* (2015) was inspired by her experiences of travelling (Fig. 10) (email to the author, 19 February 2017). Here, she depicts a landscape floating in a plastic bag filled with water, conjuring a sense of displacement. In her latest works, Zhang explores different spaces and realms within a single composition. *In Between* (2016), for example, depicts both traditional and Lego landscapes, divided by transparent panels (Fig. 11). The varying perspectives enhance the separation between the two realms.

The young ink artists discussed here are only four among the numerous artists in Hong Kong who have chosen to engage with the ink-painting tradition. They may no longer have a strong connection with their predecessors, but they do take inspiration from them in their quest to innovate and develop a highly distinctive artistic voice. As they delve into more conceptual realms, the choice of medium becomes secondary—and yet, they choose to retain a certain connection to the ink tradition. Moving freely between Chinese and Western materials and techniques, these ink artists produce works that draw not only from the ink-painting tradition, but also from the world around them. Collectively, they represent the art form's ongoing evolution and reinterpretation while also evoking an artistic voice that embodies Hong Kong's unique identity and spirit. It is encouraging and inspiring to see young artists continue to adapt and reimagine this ancient art form, creating art that echoes the sensibilities of our environment and society.

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All images are courtesy of the artists.