

Examining “Inquiry on Water”: Advancing in between Tradition and Contemporary

The evolution of Ink art symbolises the innovation as well as the continuity of the rich heritage of Chinese civilization, its long history of development merges the past and present of Chinese culture. As a first-of-its-kind cultural brand with the premise of contemporary ink art, INK NOW has arrived in Shanghai amid the “Shanghai Art Week”. In collaboration with Suning Art Museum, INK NOW has organised the exhibition “Inquiry on Water” (1st November, 2019 to 31st January, 2020) and an international symposium (1st, 2nd and 9th of November). Through professional curatorial and meaningful dialogues among artists, academics and art professionals, the platform aims to put forward the discussion of both the past and future development of ink art.

1. To Begin an “Inquiry” with “Water”, in collaboration with Suning Art Museum

The title of the exhibition “Inquiry on Water” elucidates the aspiration to set ink art apart from the traditional Chinese painting in its conscious perspective and inquisitive attitude towards the nature of “water”, redefining the cultural identity and expression of the art form. As explained by the curator of the exhibition, Calvin Hui, “having undergone more than a thousand years of transformation, Chinese ink art has become an idiosyncratic language of the cultural tradition and national aesthetics of the East. However, the path to the international stage is not without obstacles. It is a tall order for ink art to enter the arena of international cultural exchange and at the same time to have our own cultural language treated in a parallel manner, as it involves the intricate relationships among international cultures as well as the shifting political landscape. Meanwhile, contemporary ink emphasises on “contemporary expression”, which entails the use of multimedia and multidisciplinary applications, connecting with today’s science and technology, culture and thinking.” Building on the spirituality of Eastern culture and its emphasis on the role of ink as the unique language of Chinese culture, this exhibition takes it upon itself to negotiate with the structure of global cultural dynamics through the “inquiry on water”, which includes the re-examination of the contemporary art scene which sees the resurgence of conservatism and protectionism, this is an important undertaking of great historical significance that requires our immediate attention, it is also how we fulfil the obligation of reviving Chinese culture.

As one of the organisers of this exhibition, Calvin strives to build a cultural brand and platform with the focus of contemporary ink through his brainchild INK NOW. Anchoring on the cultural concept of “Eastern origin in contemporary expression”, it seeks to promote the communication and development of the distinguished culture of China. Imprinted with such vision, the exhibition delves into the subject of “water” through a systematic and methodical presentation of ink art. Bringing together 11 influential modern and contemporary ink artists and practitioners, including Wang Jieyin, Hsiao Chin, Liu Guosong, Hsu Yungchin, Ren Tianjin, Qiu Deshu, Wang Tiande, Wang Huangsheng, Li Lei, Sophie Chang and Victor Wong, INK NOW chronicles the development of ink art from traditional to modern to contemporary, and analyses the past and present of the art form. Moreover, it is hoped that the Eastern cultural identity, ethics and values, which are realised through the integrated structure of the social, art and culture, will be carefully re-examined, building a bridge for those newly established forms of ink art.

Another organiser of the exhibition, Suning Art Museum has long been practicing a systematic collection of traditional Chinese ink art, examples of its collection are Xia Gui’s *Villa and Snowy Mountains*, Chen Rong’s *Dragons Reaching for a Pearl*, Wu Zhen’s *Ink Bamboo*, and Wang Hui’s *Landscapes after Song and Yuan Masters* etc. The wealth of its collection ranges from Xia Gui and Chen Rong from Southern Song dynasty, Wu Zhen from Yuan dynasty, Shen Zhou, Wen Zhengming and Bada Shanren from Ming dynasty, to modern masters such as Sanyu, Lin Fengmin, Fu Baoshi and Zhang Daqian etc. In light of this exhibition, the museum will display Chen Rong’s *Dragons Reaching for a Pearl*. The most important work in the museum’s collection, the masterpiece, which was collected by renowned connoisseurs Zhang Hang and C.C. Wang, has broken several personal auction records in the

secondary market in the past. Depicting two dragons swirling joyfully around a pearl alluding to the state of “hundun” in Taoism, the primordial chaos at the beginning of the universe, this paragon of traditional Chinese ink painting will be presented in moving images alongside with Victor Wong’s 3D inkscape *The New Horizon*, unleashing a tension between traditional ink and technology and opening a discourse between the past and present. Such innovative presentation echoes with the subject of investigation of the exhibition, leading us to ponder deeper on the evolution of ink art and what it means in the future.

2. Rethink the Past, Embrace the Present

Tracing back to its long lineage in art history, ink and brush have long cultivated a particular aesthetic principle. Notably, after the Songjiang School in the late Ming dynasty, Dong Qichang’s insightful theory of literati painting set forward the idea of conceptual imagery of ink that continues to influence to this day; Shi Tao’s famous quote “brush and ink should follow their time” signifies the timeless value of ink even before it entered the context of modernity. Since the beginning of modernisation of ink in the 1960s, Liu Guosong spearheaded the ink art movement by expanding the artistic vocabulary of ink while discreetly maintaining his reverence for its tradition and standard. He believes that the balance between tradition and innovation cannot be achieved by “imitating the new to replace imitating the old; copying from Western art to replace copying from Chinese art”. Similarly, the Fifth Moon Group founded by the artist responded to the development of Western art through the lens of Chinese tradition. The redefinition of ink as a spiritual symbol rather than merely a medium was an important step towards the modernisation of ink art, as asserted by Liu, “to regard ink as material is to smother the future of Chinese art”.

One cannot discuss the subject of tradition without bringing up Hsiao Chin, the artist who played an important role in promoting meaningful cultural exchange between the East and West during the post-war period. In 1956, Hsiao founded Ton Fan Art Group, through which the members were able to exhibit their boundless creativity through modernist art. Hsiao travelled to Europe on his own in 1957 and finally settled in Milan, where he realised the importance of one’s cultural root. Since then, he began to study traditional Chinese philosophies such as Taoism and Buddhism, and developed a highly personal style that departs from the conventional abstract art of the West which was mostly pictorial and emotional. Meanwhile, he also founded Punto International Art Movement together with Italian artist Antonio Calderara, Punto was the only avant-garde movement in the West that advocated Eastern philosophical views. During this revolutionary era in art history, Hsiao adhered to his own belief and established his own path away from institutional standards and traditional framework.

Injecting the Eastern spirit of mindfulness in the Western individualistic dialectic thinking as a way to correct the shortcomings of Western rationalism, Hsiao Chin has developed a distinctive set of value and vision that contribute to his unique style. Therefore, Hsiao’s tireless research and profound understanding in both Eastern and Western art, philosophies, religions as well as space science have become not only his nourishment but also crucial assets in his creative interpretation of the nature of the universe and the balance of life force. Featured in this exhibition is his work *Gathering the Force - 1* executed in 1965, where the artist infuses the dynamism of the spiritual energy of the East into his abstract expression, his vigorous brushstrokes and symbolic colour contrast evoke the Taoist notion of the original state of the universe and the energy within that created all living things. His work also permeates what the artist calls “chi”, a genuine spirituality and perceptible sensitivity resulting from the breath of his self-introspection. Hsiao observes the physical world through his understanding in metaphysical phenomenology. Manifesting the “force” on canvas with broad brushstrokes, the artist translates the energy in the universe into a tangible visual art form. He also emphasises on natural and spontaneous expression, a doorway that leads him to the deeper meaning of human existence, the world, and all the tangible and intangible things in the universe. Undoubtedly, Hsiao has given rise to many new elements and energy in Western abstract art with his own ideas, which are not only his personal epiphanies, but also the answers to our questions about the future of traditions, the East and

West.

Wang Jieyin once said, "I was born to paint", perhaps all artists begin with a passion in art. Born in 1941, Wang's artistic career is clearly not one straight road, which began with woodblock print, then oil painting, and finally followed by ink painting, each period took him about 20 years. To him, it is his destiny and also the natural course of life. The peculiar cadence of his contemporary ink art stems from his unwavering commitment in painting and indelible attachment to landscapes, his private conversation with tradition imbues with both the philosophical quality of the ancient time and the artistic language of the contemporary era. Wang has personally selected a large scale work for this exhibition. Having practiced new ink art for so many years, Wang has managed to filter out those complex and diverse approaches of ink art, reducing water and ink to their purest artistic form whose power is conveyed in between those small and delicate brushstrokes evident in the exhibiting large scale work. On one hand, the artist preserves the cultural memories of the traditional landscape; on the other hand, he confronts the challenges brought about by modern industrialization. As the art historian Tsao Hsingyuan put it, "Wang Jieyin employs the fragmented approach with industrial waste to block us from the common idea of nature of the agricultural period, instead he explores a kind of literati sentiment with which ink comes to express the post-industrial era." Indeed, while juggling with modernity, Wang's abstract art overlaps with different dimensions, creating a compelling artistic language that cements the place of Eastern art with its tradition and classicism. The artist once explained his view on Western art, "if Western art is a steep mountain, then Chinese ink art is the vast wilderness, it is empty but possesses a mysterious power". Perhaps it is the immensity and long lineage of traditional Chinese culture implanted in every one of Chinese people that give birth to the Eastern charm and contemporary expression around the world.

3. Eastern Origin in Contemporary Expression

In the late 20th century and early 21st century, China underwent a tremendous transformation in its social, cultural and art history. Despite being the symbol of ancient Chinese culture, ink also had to face the alternation of language and cultural reconstruction, evolving from classical painting, gongbi (fine-line) painting, danqing (use of color red and green), literati painting, Chinese painting, national painting and realist ink painting to such pursuits as modern ink, experimental ink and conceptual ink etc. This exhibition "Inquiry on Water" is focused on the investigation of the sociological phenomena in relation to the experimental process of the modernisation of ink, particularly emphasising on its diversity and complexity. Contemporary ink is not only the result of its social and cultural landscape, but also the reinvention of artistic expression brought about by the change of social structure. Furthermore, contemporary ink artists often communicate through the microscopic and personal perspective, underlining the importance of the self over the subjects of the works, exploring the inner world in the metaphysical realm. Eschewing the "materials" and establishing its unique intrinsic value through the insightful understanding of contemporary culture, such endeavour is the manifestation of contemporaneity of modern aesthetics.

For this reason, artists who work on abstraction often carry a kind of philosophical quality. From traditional calligraphy to contemporary ink, Hsu Yungchin's more than 50 years of artistic career is a adventure of self-discovery, at the same time his art speaks to the limitless possibility and vigor of ink as a medium. Taoist thoughts are always palpable in Hsu's art, for example, the work featured in this exhibition is titled *Everything Consists of Yin and Yang*, and "Yin" and "Yang" are the fundamental concept of Taoist cosmology. His poetic and calligraphic composition emanates the ancient wisdoms from Taoism and Confucianism, as explained by Hsu himself, "the wisdom of Laozi opens me up". Hsu practiced traditional calligraphy in the first 20 years of his professional career spanning more than five decades, but then he had a sudden revelation on the balance between tradition and contemporaneity, the notions of "black and white as one" and "action and inaction as one" aptly reveal the hidden freedom of ink. By the same token, tradition and contemporaneity do not necessarily contradict each other, in turn, harmonisation is the best response to the past and also the most aspiring ambition for the future. Hsu turns lines into symbols while retaining the calligraphic momentum, through "writing" he breaks the barrier between pictorial language and written language, and finds his way to the

tension and expressiveness in the amalgamation between the spirit of calligraphy and ink imageries. Such inquisitive attitude not only expands the artistic vocabulary of ink, but also allows more room for the experimentation of ink as a medium.

During his lifelong artistic career, artist Qiu Deshu has developed his very own artistic philosophy – fissure. He believes that “art has the power to fulfil one’s soul”, and fissure is his epiphany about life. The careful delineation of the physical characteristics and patterns of rocks is carried out through tearing, ripping, reconstructing and layering, such process transfigures xuan paper from a traditional painting tool to a multi-layered collage-like artistic form. Qiu once said that “‘fissure’ is my own artistic language and philosophical foundation, it is a wound that reminds us of the consequences of rapid modernisation on nature and every individual”. His art is an effort to create a completely new approach through reinventing the language of traditional materials. Although it has not abandoned the specific format of traditional landscape, it is still a breakthrough in terms of its approach and aesthetics. To a certain extent, his art maintains a connection to the traditional literati spirit, hence the modern and post-industrialist civilisation embodied in it presents a rupture in the peaceful relationship between man and the nature, which imbues the subject matter with a sense of Eastern philosophical quality.

Speaking of conceptual ink art, Wang Tiande incessantly contemplates his art and searches for new ways in his creative process. For instance, while he was browsing artworks in an auction house, his immediate reaction was to think about how to incorporate ancient art in his own works. By going against the current and avoiding to use of only one single methodology in his research, Wang began with the study of paintings from Ming and Ching dynasties, and then moved “upstream” to the examination of tradition which allowed him to ponder on its significance in his creative process in the contemporary context. As early as the 1990s, Wang began to create conceptual ink installations in order to widen people’s limited understanding about the medium ink. In the recent two decades, he has replaced the use of brush with incense sticks. Like pyrography, he “paints” by making burn marks on vellum, subverting the traditional paradigm in regards of the media and procedures of painting while retaining the structural features of Eastern classicism. The traces of time left by the burn marks in his ink works bring the artist to a meditative state which requires continuous practice. This is as much a test on the artist’s belief as a challenge in the viewing experience, because almost everyone would encounter illusion in front of his works. Contemporaneity takes the art of Wang deeper through layer after layer of history, and finally the linkage between the past and present is found on its way back to modernity in its overlapping creative manifestation and the resulting afterimages.

Every artist paves his or her own way to self-discovery and artistic ideology. In his *Daily-Practice* series, Wang Huangsheng chooses the “daily practice” of calligraphy, a traditional ritual of repetitive practice for culture cultivation and enlightenment, as the subject of his works. By rewriting some of the classical poetry that he practiced as a young man in the 1970s, the artist described, “it not only recalibrates and releases the feelings of being a youth with classical sensibility, but also reminisces and recalls the past memory of that particular period.” Aligning with the theme of this exhibition which looks into history through the lens of today, “daily rhythm gives rise to the questions of the unknown and the future, which is also a way to reflect on and express reverence for history”. Based on the principles of calligraphy, *Daily-Practice* has forged an original visual language unique to the artist through the use of lines. As we all know, throughout his successful and long lasting professional career, the museum director and curator never fails to weave the lifeline for his own artistic practice. Eastern origin and the peculiarity of ink culture are artistic philosophy that is to be perceived by heart, therefore only through internalising the observation and experience of ordinary subject matters in the external world and turning them into creative expressions in visual art can one earn a place in the global culture which celebrates both shared and individual values.

Also an artist with a rich experience in art administration and curating, Li Lei also needs to oscillate between artistic creation and operation in his artistic career. With his absolute respect for art, Li consistently communicates his reflection on life, society, history and himself in his abstract paintings. In

his effort to investigate and find the balance in life, art serves as a channel to his true self. Li Lei's "Chinese poetic abstraction" is an attempt to open a new path for Chinese abstract art, its most distinctive feature is the congruous combination of the modern language of Western art and the traditional poeticism of Chinese painting. Li's works manifest the free spirit and spontaneity in Chinese tradition in their organic expression of forms and colours, at the same time the virtuosity of his modern visual language is in full display. This exhibition features one of the artist's acrylic on canvas works, in his recount of the creative process for this artwork, Li mentioned that "to me, the ink spirit in a painting means its rhythmic vitality, the balance between yin and yang, the dynamic application of the brush and the emotional rendering." Therefore, the ink spirit does not lie only in the property of the medium, nor is it just about ink being the medium for the catharsis of the artist's emotions and spirituality. Although Li Lei does not use the traditional xuan paper, his art infuses a powerful ink spirit. "To paint from the heart" is the true meaning of ink art.

Continuing to develop and transform, the art of Sophie Chang is her means to convey her ideas and connect with her soul. Using ink as the medium and immersing herself in the nature, Sophie releases her profound emotions and remarkable creativity in the discourse between her spirituality and Eastern culture. She affirms that the uniqueness of ink art lies in the Easternness of its cultural origin, so even abstraction is able to convey a sense of "Zen". Having said that, such imagery is not confined to Eastern expression, as today's ink art has already broken free from the boundary that divides the East and West, exhibiting its cultural idiosyncrasy on the international stage.

Returning to the theme, "Inquiry on Water", this exhibition also presents an artwork of the same title by Ren Tianjin. In this calligraphy work, not only can we see the vigor of the brush in its rhythmic and dynamic movements, but also the reflection on Eastern spirituality in the context of globalisation through the eyes of Eastern origin. Apparently, the essence of water is not a mutually exclusive "decision" of the East or the West, it is the Eastern wisdom in response to the complex global condition. Ren attained his doctor's degree in France, he is an artist and also an art collector and connoisseur. Having witnessed the cultural exchange between the East and West for years, he addresses the current social and cultural situation with deep sentiment. Hence, besides the Eastern elements, his art also embodies a prudent consciousness to ponder on the matters of cultural identity in this diverse and multicultural arena, allowing the intensity and exuberance of Western expressionism and the subtleness and esteem of traditional literati to complement each other on his picture planes. It is through such tension that the artist finds his strong personal style and contemporaneity in his works that continue to negotiate between tradition and innovation, transcending cultural boundaries.

4.The Rise of Technology and the Future of Ink

Another highlight of the exhibition is the showcase of "tech ink". China is increasingly rising to become a global power, from the advancement of the science and technology to the development of art and culture, the next world's superpower is already gaining a firm foothold on the international stage. While the investigation of the relationship between tradition and contemporaneity is still valid early in this century, given the attention China is receiving globally, another question to ask is how to write the history of ink art in the future. As pointed out by Zhou Youguang, "one needs to look at China through the lens of the world, instead of looking at the world through the lens of China". The complexity of the globalised world makes it impossible for countries to advance on their individual parallel paths without crossing with each other, and the same idea applies to every discipline and sector, giving rise to various cross over possibilities. At the same time, "tech ink" is posing a question to the future: what is the limit?

The world's first artificial intelligent ink artist invented by artist Victor Wong, A.I Gemini sits in the centre of today's discourse on age, science and art. The earlier works of Victor were mostly digital art before he delved into the research of artificial intelligence art, from there he began his multimedia creative career experimenting diversity of approaches such as 3D hologram, 3D printed sculptures and tech ink etc. The advent of technology seems to be adding another layer of fog veiling our vision in our exploration of the nature of art. Unlike the cognitive functions of human brain, artificial intelligence

produces secondary output by processing selected data and codes, the manipulation and unpredictability of artificial intelligence remind us that, in our quest to uncover the future of ink art, we must be grounded in the present in order to form new perspectives in art and embrace the unlimited possibilities in the future which undoubtedly is still full of many different challenges.

Ink art is not solely a form of expression with the use water and ink, it is a mass media that embodies the entire cultural paradigm and the essence of its spirit, its significance takes the meaning of media beyond its original content, ink beyond its traditional framework. Ink art is at once a new media, new creative concept and experimentation. However, as the American art historian H.H. Arnason put it, "in view of a world full of diversity, any artistic style and medium that can open a new dialogue to inspire new thoughts and use any possible materials to turn one's knowledge, aspiration or imagination into meaningful expression of the culture and social secrets of our time is what I call the most remarkable art", hence, whether it is an inquiry on tradition or approach and medium or the future, and whether ink is repeating history with its ups and downs, it is never about a competition between Eastern and Western cultures. As a cultural symbol, ink art should be focused on cultivating its intrinsic cultural value, which is the fundamental principle to preserve and promote every culture.

Likewise, what this exhibition searching for is not merely a standard answer to the "inquiry on water", but a new path for artistic creation through diverse art practices and experimentations by different artists, to "inquire" in order to go forward. From the past to present, the goal of all kinds of ink experimentations, such as modern ink, experimental ink, and tech ink etc., has been to bring Chinese ink art out of the margin of international art scene and establish a firmer foothold. There are countless ways to break free from the divide between the East and West, yet they all share the same starting point, which is the "Eastern origin". Lastly, going back to the objective of the exhibition, in order to promote the development of Chinese ink art and initiate academic exchange on an international level, and to re-examine and reconstruct the knowledge of the East, not only do we need to ensure the preservation of ink tradition, but also our constant reflection on Eastern spirituality when globalisation has become an universal norm, or more precisely, when ink has become an universal medium. From an objective and comprehensive perspective, "Inquiry on Water" aims to further nurture the development of ink art internationally, turning the emblem of Chinese culture into part of the universal culture.