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## A Spirit in the Dark

Chinese artist Zheng Chongbin's works are radical interpretations of Chinese ink art's classical form, focusing on ink not as a medium but as physical matter.

By *Olivia Wang*

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### Shanghai

With his shoulder-length wavy hair, hoop earring and goatee, one wouldn't expect Zheng Chongbin to be so mild-mannered and soft-spoken. For an artist of his accomplishment, he is almost shy, yet he possesses a quiet charisma. Over a lunch of smoked fish that he insisted I must try, we discuss his art and his next exhibition, to be held in May. Deboning the fish with the intense and consummate skill of a surgeon, he speaks with incisive, eager eyes.

Mr. Zheng's sensibility is influenced both by Chinese and Western artistic practices—two traditions that are, on the surface, at odds with each other. But Mr. Zheng finds their affinities and brings them together. What results is a unique and dynamic perspective.

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Mr. Zheng's approach reflects his bicultural education. Born in 1961 here in Shanghai, Mr. Zheng trained as an ink painter at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou. He later received a master's in fine arts from the San Francisco Art Institute. This synthesis of East and West has allowed him to draw parallels between the Abstract expressionists and Chinese literati painters. For example, Mr. Zheng sees similarities between Jackson Pollock and Bada Shanren, a 17th-century Chinese artist who, after the fall of the Ming dynasty, used painting as a means of protesting the new Manchu rule. Just as Pollock channeled his anger and energy onto the canvas, Mr. Zheng explains, Bada expressed his frustration and dissatisfaction for the new regime through disturbing, physically charged brushstrokes. Both artists have created works whose energy emanates far beyond the confines of their canvas or paper surface. "It is not about what they paint," Mr. Zheng says. "It's about how they paint."

Mr. Zheng's own practice has evolved over years. As an undergraduate he studied figure painting. Then for several years afterward he focused on conceptual and installation art. But Mr. Zheng is best-known for his radical interpretation of the classical ink-painting form. Combining a monochromatic ink palette with white acrylic and using techniques of collage, paper-soaking and paint-layering, Mr. Zheng creates intricate, abstract paintings. This is encapsulated in "Season" (2014), in which Mr. Zheng plays with layers and textures, bringing out the tensions between light and dark, ink and acrylic, translucency and opacity. The work is composed of vertical panes. On one side are soft, fluid washes of gray ink. In the middle, the ink is layered with white acrylic. The final panel is saturated in ink—the blackness is dense yet iridescent. The effect is abstract, bold and enthralling.

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'Season' (2014) by Zheng Chongbin. PHOTO:  
ZHENG CHONGBIN

Many Chinese contemporary artists are involved in a revival of Chinese ink painting, drawing inspiration from antiquity. Known as “contemporary ink,” an increasing number of museums are staging exhibitions dedicated to this genre—including, most recently, the 2013 “Ink Art” show at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art. But Mr. Zheng’s intention is not to revive traditional ink painting so much as to forge a path that is completely his own, focusing instead on ink not as a medium but as physical matter. He brings forth the tactile nature of ink, amplifying its volume, texture and

depth. There is a three-dimensional sculptural presence to his work.

Mr. Zheng has also been making increasingly innovative use of light in some of his works. He finds deep inspiration in the natural light and landscape of Northern California (where he has lived since the early 1990s), to the paintings of Caravaggio and Turner and the Light and Space Movement. Ink and light play an equal role in Mr. Zheng’s work. To him, they are both formless, adaptable and with depth. In “Wordless, Formless” (2015), Mr. Zheng created installations that employ light to further enhance the sculptural potential of ink, changing appearance as the observer moves around them.

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“Wordless, Formless” will be shown in May as part of Mr. Zheng’s solo exhibition at Beijing’s Ink Studio. That same month, Mr. Zheng’s work will be included in group shows at Daimler Contemporary in Berlin and at the Venice Biennale. This comes after the Los Angeles County Museum of Art recently acquired “Turbulence” (2013), one of Mr. Zheng’s major works.

While its connection to the East may not always be palpable in Mr. Zheng’s art, one critical principle of Chinese ink has remained constant throughout: *qiyun*, or “resonance of the spirit.” This is the energy and life that resonates from an artwork. When I ask how one can discern whether this resonance is present, Mr. Zheng smiles and responds: “You can just feel it.”