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King of ink

Kavita Daswani

To Zheng Chongbin, ink is like a lead character in a play, the star of his shows. Ask him to talk about his fascination with ink, and he renders an elegant and articulate viewpoint as to why this is his preferred medium, referring to its many nuances, tonalities and layers.

The contemporary artist will share his affinity with ink during INKquiry, his first ever Hong Kong show that opens this week and runs until June 4. Organised by Ooi Botos art gallery in a pop-up space in Chai Wan, the exhibition features 12 pieces, all created by Zheng specifically for the event in his studio in San Francisco. There, says Zheng - who also spends much of his time on mainland China - he can work in a 'cohesive flow'.

'I can keep my focus on the work, and can be in touch with the depth of the ink, and the physicality and scale of the work.'

In international art circles, Zheng has carved out a name for himself as a resolutely modern and contemporary ink artist, his dramatic, monochromatic pieces inspired

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as much by, say, different projections of nature as by his own musings about the idea of what he is looking at.

There is a spare, abstract quality to his work, which can challenge conventional notions of traditional Chinese landscape ink painting. His repertoire has seen him exhibit at top-tier museums such as the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, the Shanghai Art Museum and Pacific Asia Museum in Los Angeles.

Zheng is credited with pushing the boundaries of ink painting and he will be speaking, on May 23, at an Asia Society panel discussion on The Future of Contemporary Ink Painting. This is a subject, after all, that Zheng spends much of his time thinking about. 'There has been a lot of attention on how ink media is shifting,' he says, adding that so far, his work has tended to be acquired primarily by collectors in the West.

'My idea is that because ink is so unique, it has a lot of resonance in terms of the reference to classic Chinese paintings. There are lots of dimensions coming out of the ink that don't exist in contemporary art paintings. I want people to start looking at ink as more universal, and in a broader context.'

Zheng was born in Shanghai in 1961, before the Cultural Revolution. When his neighbours were summarily 'retired' from politics, they would paint every day, while the young Zheng would look on, enthralled. From them, he learnt his first technical skills. By the time he was a teenager, he had acquired a profound love of painting, and was working with a teacher who showed him how to practise by painting daily.

'He took me to museums, put me in a class, and that's how I really started studying this media.'

He received his bachelor's in fine arts from the Chinese Painting Department of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou (since renamed the China Academy of Fine Arts), where he taught for four years after graduation. In 1991, he enrolled in the master's programme at the San Francisco Art Institute. 'It certainly was the place I wanted to be,' he says of his move. 'Being in San Francisco, there is a lot of support from the international art community. I can work with people anywhere, and am also very involved in the Bay Area.'

Not that there weren't assimilation issues. 'Initially, it was difficult to establish myself,' Zheng says. 'There was culture shock. I was an immigrant and there was a big adjustment in every aspect of my life. But I was in a fellowship programme and quickly merged into the art community. I just love the experience of living here, to be able to incorporate daily life into art.'

Zheng bemoans the ongoing dilemma in the US where budgets for art programmes in public schools are being slashed. 'It's terrible,' he says. 'Art should be a fundamental part of everyone's education. It's important because art can broaden the view of kids and young people, expand their imagination and change the way they look at the world. It's the main ingredient to being creative in life.'

In China, he says, an education in fine arts has been expanded to encompass everything from graphics to fashion design. He remembers when he was at art

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school in Hangzhou, when there were only 60 students a year. Now, he says, there are thousands - but many focus primarily on commercial art.

'There is more of a perception now, even in China, that art is a money-making career,' he says.

Certainly, in recent years, prices for Chinese art have been driven sky-high by collectors who are happy to pay top dollar for what they covet. But Zheng says this trend is a skewed perception of the intrinsic value of art on the mainland.

'Collectors are interested as long as there is market value,' he says. But he feels the academic value should be the most important thing. 'There are a few artists I know who are not even aware how much people are paying for their work. To them, it is irrelevant, and when they find out, they feel it's shocking or strange.

'To an artist, when the work is done, it's done. When it goes into someone else's hands, then it's time to start working on something else.

But, he admits, 'at the same time it is wonderful to have collectors who can [provide] the means by which we can keep working'.

INKquiry, ArtEast Island, Unit 614, 6/F Chai Wan Industrial City Phase 1, 60 Wing Tai Road, Chai Wan, Friday to June 4. Future of Contemporary Ink Painting panel discussion hosted by the Asia Society, May 23, 6.30pm, Agnes b Cinema, the HK Art Centre