

# ORIENTATIONS

Wai-Ying Beres, Tiffany, “Materials of Inspiration: Zheng Chongbin” *Orientations*, July/August 2017

Interview  
Jun 30

## Materials of Inspiration: Zheng Chongbin

Contemporary artist Zheng Chongbin (b. 1961, Shanghai) has turned Chinese painting inside out, focusing on its materials and surface, the performance and process of painting. Zheng’s practice encompasses abstract painting using traditional ink and acrylic on paper, as well as large-scale installations with ink, video or other materials. His installations were recently exhibited at the 2016 Shanghai Biennale and the 2015 Venice Biennale, at the Palazzo Bembo.

Having lived in two cultures, Zheng has been deeply influenced by both Chinese and Western traditions. Trained in classical Chinese painting, he was once a teacher of figure painting in the Department of Chinese Painting at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, Hangzhou (now the China Academy of Art). During the 1980s he began to experiment, painting abstracted figures and deconstructing the orthodoxy of his painterly practice. Zheng’s artistic experiments continued, and in 1988 he moved to the US, becoming the first international fellow of the San Francisco Art Institute, where he received his MFA. Immersed in the world of contemporary art theory, Zheng found some of the answers he was looking for in the work of Western abstract expressionists like Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell and Franz Kline. Today, Zheng—an international artist with studios in both the California Bay Area and Shanghai—creates art that has been said to be ‘universally appreciated by Chinese and non-Chinese audiences’.

On a visit to his California warehouse studio earlier this year, surrounded by shipping crates, piles of paper and other objects, Tiffany Wai-Ying Beres talked to Zheng about his creative inspiration.

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Zheng Chongbin in his California studio

**Tiffany Wai-Ying Beres** You have a great many objects in your studio. Do you consider yourself a collector?

**Zheng Chongbin** No—my notion of collectors is that they collect systematically. If they are true collectors, they should study and be dedicated to the process, building their collections based on precision and taste ... in a way, a collection is in itself almost an art form. It is the creation of something more meaningful than what one or two objects are alone. A collection is a reflection of the collector's artistic sensibility. It is a kind of process of artistic creation.

I, on the other hand, like to collect work in relation to what I do. It is almost like my collections are part of my art material, or a mental engagement with my own art process. There is no real logic behind the objects. My collection is more about inspiration. Ultimately, I want to turn these things into actions—these are things that may change or influence my own work.

**TWB** It's fun to look at your workspace because of all the interesting objects around. This ornate clock, for instance—where does it come from?

**ZCB** The clock came from the antique shop that used to be next door. It is a cast-iron table clock made in America. I collected it not because I like the clock—I mean, I do like the clock—but what I like more is the ticking sound and its sense of time. There's length, there's a

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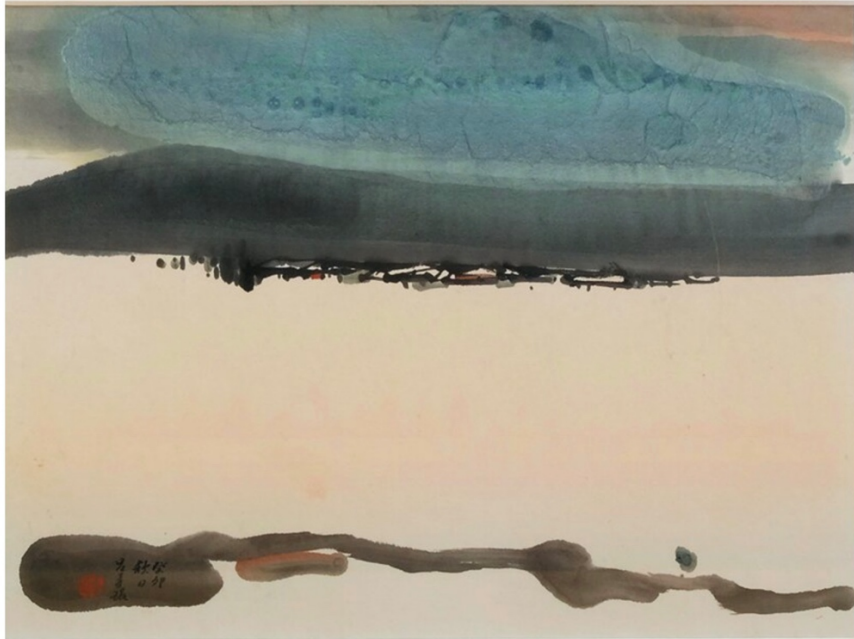
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ticking sound that reverberates. I love it. At one point I wanted to make a video incorporating the sound, but in the end I didn't.

The clock uses a wind-up mechanism. In a way, I'd like to think this kind of mechanical system also affects human behaviour. I have to turn the key every two weeks, and now it has become a habit. Every time I go on a trip, the first thing I do when I return is turn the key to tighten the spring.

**TWB** And what about this ink box on your desk?

**ZCB** It's from a classmate who has left this world—Jiang Jin. It is sentimental. He gave it to me in the '90s when he came to California for an exhibition I helped set up. He won the national championship for calligraphy in China, and was a brilliant calligrapher, painter and scholar of classical literature. There are lots of things here that have stories and subjective meaning.



*Abstract Island*  
By Lui Shou-kwan (1919–75), 1963  
Chinese ink and colour on paper, 36.5 x 47 cm

**TWB** You are a contemporary artist, but do you realize that what you see from your desk is stacks of Chinese *xuan* paper, hundreds of bottles of ink and your brushpot full of brushes—in other words traditional materials?

**ZCB** That's true! Actually, from the very beginning when I first started art as a kid, there was always this connection to materials. Before my first lesson, my teacher sent me to the store with a list of things to buy—three basic brushes, an inkstick, paints and so on. Look, here's the first inkstone I bought, in the 1970s in Shanghai. But I kept them under my bed for a year. Before I could paint, I was only allowed to study and practise calligraphy, using other materials. Periodically, I would take the painting materials out and admire them. It was a treasure box!

I still treasure these materials. I think the reason I have stuck with ink all these years is because of my relationship to it. But now ink is no longer just a language, a medium or a material—the reason I choose ink is because it has to do with my identity; moreover, in the context of contemporary art there are huge possibilities that have not yet been realized with ink. It is a liquid with interesting forms, geometries and different behaviours. I like thinking about ink in ways you wouldn't normally: about the way it settles on the paper, about painting in non-traditional ways, about lines and calligraphy, about how you exercise your relationship with nature within the framework of Chinese philosophy ... Although I have been working in video installation and mixed media in relation to the meaning of materiality, these are also in some way linked to traditional practice. I see my art as breaking down the medium specificity by engaging with ink in untraditional ways. This is something I want to push further.

**TWB** Ink and traditional materials are so important to you, and yet I don't see any Chinese paintings here.

**ZCB** I don't have many Chinese paintings, but I do have a few by Lui Shou-kwan [1919–75]. I like his work because he isn't afraid of blankness—whole sections are pure white. For him, it's not about light, but the notion of space. How do you interpret space in a Chinese painting? There are no boundaries. I think he is one of the pioneers of modern Chinese ink painting because he saw this blankness for its boundless possibilities and took advantage of that freedom. There is also a great sense of purity in these ink surfaces, and yet the translucency emits the qualities of space and light. Lui pushed traditional language further to be more expressive and physical. He had a very different focus to other artists at that time.

**TWB** Is Lui Shou-kwan the only Chinese painter in your collection?

**ZCB** The only other Chinese painting that I have is by Chen Jialing [b. 1937], my former private teacher. He was teaching at Shanghai Academy of Art at the time. It was his gift of hope and encouragement to me when I left China for the States, and I think it is one of his best works. It is not like his later work, with all the colours and the focus on mannerism. This work is beautiful in the way the water and sky are painted—the stain of the water marks, and the different layers of ink. The brushwork is really beautiful—it's autonomous and controlled at the same time, with horizontal lines such that only water and ink can create. Also, there are

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two flying cranes, which I think Chen painted to represent my wife and me leaving China. It is interesting to be a character in an artwork. The birds are tiny, but the painting is incredible. I guess this is the first artwork I ever possessed. It's been with me all these years.



Untitled  
By Chen Jialing (b. 1937), 1988  
Chinese ink on paper, 48 x 45 cm

**TWB** If you could collect the work of any traditional Chinese artist, who would it be?

**ZCB** I would probably collect Shitao [1642–1707] or Bada Shanren [1626–1705]. I love their works the most—even their very small pieces. I particularly like their albums. I have a Shitao book at home, and I flip through the pages almost every day. The works I like best are not his early ones, which have a more traditional composition—I much prefer the works that have a feeling of being incomplete, that extend beyond the paper.

**TWB** What was the first Western work you collected?



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**ZCB** It was actually an exchange with another artist. It was in the late '90s, when I had a studio on San Francisco's Potrero Avenue, which I shared with other artists. This artist did a kind of calligraphy—she wrote in a very awkward way because she had injured her right [dominant] hand. She began to use her left hand, and would just write whatever came into her mind. It was kind of political, feminist, and abstract, too. At the time, I was working on my 'Blot Series'. I liked the idea of escaping the intentional. These 'auto'-paintings, painted in a state that the artist did not control, were intriguing. Also there was this bodily experience in terms of working with the media, because of her hand injury.

**TWB** It sounds as if you are interested in collecting art that resonates with your own?

**ZCB** I've never really thought about collecting art for the sake of collecting. I am not really in a position to do that. For me, it is more about the dialogue—it is something you live with, to enjoy and that inspires. For me, it is more interesting to have something that serves a purpose rather than being tucked away somewhere. In other words, I don't really look at these things as objects I own. It is a very different kind of psychological relationship: they become part of my life. You hear about collectors who are so passionate that they would do almost anything to get a piece. That's not me.

To me, creating art is the most important part of my life, so anything I collect must have some engagement with my own art. There should be something that it can bring to my own artwork. It is almost like my collection is my art material.



*Le Soleil Levant (Harbour Scene with Rising Sun)*  
By Claude Lorrain (1600–82), 1634  
Etching and drypoint, 13.5 x 20.5 cm

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**TWB** I am looking at this very classical-seeming work—what is this piece and how does it relate as art material?

**ZCB** It's an etching by the landscape artist Claude Lorrain [1600–82]. Lorrain was a French painter and engraver of the Baroque era—a contemporary of the Dutch Golden Age painters. This is Lorrain's fifth plate, which is why it is still quite sharp. Apparently it used to be in the Hermitage collection, but in the 1920s the Russians needed hard currency so they sold many pieces. I was introduced to a dealership by one of my collector friends, and I immediately fell in love. Lorrain was a landscape artist, and one of his favourite topics is painted seaports. What I love is his atmospheric scenery and the light always on the horizon, the way he painted the sky.

**TWB** It is interesting that a 17th century etching would resonate so strongly with a painter trained in classical Chinese painting, particularly figure painting.

**ZCB** [When I was studying art] I did a lot of landscape painting and drawing in Tibet—the sky is always a big part of the narrative for landscape painting—so it is something I can relate to because of all of the representational work I used to do. When I see this work, it recalls [Chinese] Song [dynasty; 960–1279] painting and the way we look at nature, the different views. In the Western world, there is a kind of vision of symmetry, logic, and idealized order that makes it work. This work reminds me of the contemporary relevance of Western art history, and my desire to try to understand more. Moreover, the piece itself is exceptionally well drawn. It is a historical work that relates to light and nature, and I feel very connected to that. I keep the piece in the hallway at home, where I walk into the bedroom.

It is also as if something is coming out of the representational in this work, although I tend to look at its abstraction too. I find this work and its atmosphere to be very impressionistic. It's so transcendent it's almost divine, almost religious, as if he has given a biblical voice to his homogenized landscape. It has a phenomenological quality. Back then, they had ideas about the perfect world and tried to capture that quality in their art. When you see Lorrain's use of light versus how I use light, it is less about ideas—it's part of the conscious reality. The experience is important—it's like your body is actually in the space. It's very direct, like your existence is part of it.

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*Study for a Mirror*  
By Coen Young (b. 1988), 2015  
Acrylic, marble dust, enamel and paper, each: 194.3 x 115.6 cm

**TWB** I still think it is interesting that you find inspiration in a work so different from your own.

**ZCB** I have another very different work at home, a big contemporary work done by Coen Young [b. 1988], a young Australian artist. I appreciated this work because it is another reminder of how to deal with abstraction and light. I bought it during the previous Art Basel Hong Kong. Young uses marble dust and graphite and applies it on very thick paper. The surface is beautiful—it is glossy but has a lot of hues and depth. It is also minimal. I don't know the exact application process, but the work is polished so that the surface becomes like Mylar—very reflective. It is almost like an antique mirror in the way that the image is obscured. I installed it in such a way that there is some distance when you look at it. Now it is in the living room, so that it is part of the space. Originally, the work came floating in an acrylic box with a very thin frame, which I removed so that it could have maximum exposure.

I suppose why I like both these works is because I've always been interested in the reflection of light and the engaging of space. Claude Lorrain and Coen Young are both exploring these, too. The notion of space is one of the most essential questions in contemporary art. There is always something pulling from one point to the other. To me, it is about continuation and



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flow. There is some time basis. Even when I do video work, there is time and space as the frame changes. When I look at these works, I think about space.

**TWB** What about three-dimensional space? Your works take on many dimensionalities, but we've mainly discussed paintings.

**ZCB** There is a particular piece in my collection, *Untitled* [2007], a sculpture by a close friend of mine who I consider to be my mentor—Peter De Swart (b. 1949). A deep thinker and free spirit, he is an exceptional artist based in Northern California. We regularly visit each other's studios to discuss art and other related subjects. I often find his in-depth analysis and interdisciplinary understanding of art-making inspiring. *Untitled* is carved from multiple pieces of wood. I find it reminiscent of the work of the surrealist artist René Magritte [1898–1967], particularly his *The False Mirror* [1928]. The difference here is the door as the front layer of the eye, which you can open to see the secret inner eye. In this case, it alludes to the erotic consciousness with its iconic imagery and the power of enigma.

**TWB** Enigma and depth ... So the key is that your collection feeds your imagination and spirit of inquiry?

**ZCB** Every object I own is something I feel I can relate to. I don't really see the objects as sentimental, but the fact that they move me means there is an emotional layer to the work too. To me, these artworks are always alive.

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*Untitled*  
By Peter De Swart (b. 1949), 2007  
Wood and metal, 32.4 x 59.7 x 20.3 cm