

# "Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

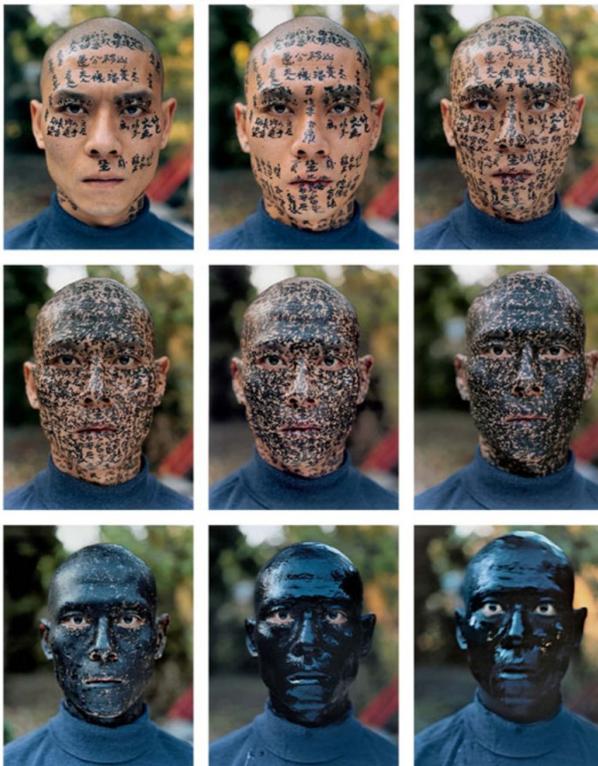
A landmark exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art brings together contemporary artists who reinvent traditional mediums and motifs

TEXT BY [REBECCA BATES](#) · Posted November 30, 2013

Ai Weiwei's arrest in 2011 was a shocking reminder, at least to the West, that the role of artist in China is frequently fraught. Indeed, in the decades since the Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s, there has been much at stake for Chinese artists as they search for a modern identity that both bears the weight of rich cultural traditions and responds to political turmoil. "Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China," a landmark exhibition at the *Metropolitan Museum of Art* in New York, brings together some 70 works created by Chinese artists in the past 30 years that draw from centuries-old techniques in art and design, underscoring how such beloved crafts as calligraphy and ceramic sculpture can be repurposed and renewed as political acts and contemporary modes of expression.



*Artificial Rock #10*, Zhan Wang, 2001. Photo courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art



In Zhang Huan's performance piece *Family Tree*, photos from which are on view in the show, terms and folktales used in fortune-telling based on a person's physiognomy are inscribed on the artist's face. Three expert calligraphers took turns painting on Zhang's skin over the course of a single day, their precise, delicate brushstrokes slowly blackening each facial feature with a different allegory. By nightfall, Zhang was completely inked over such that no Chinese characters are discernible in the final images, the artist's visage but a shadow obscured by cultural markers.

*Family Tree*, Zhang Huan, 2001. Photo: © Yale University Library



*Printing on Water (Performance in the Lhasa River, Tibet, 1996)*, Song Dong. Photos: Eugenia Burnett Tinsley

In photographs from Song Dong's *Printing on Water (Performance in the Lhasa River, Tibet, 1996)*, conducted in one of the world's most contested territories, the artist repeatedly plunges a wooden seal carved with the Chinese character for water into the river. Song commissioned the stamp from Tibetan craftsmen to serve as a symbol for water at its purest, the river untainted by human invention and the pollution of major metropolises.



*The Wave*, Ai Weiwei, 2005. Photo courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Elsewhere in the survey, Ai Weiwei uses traditional ceramic sculpting to reinterpret ancient motifs. *The Wave*, crafted from glazed ceramic, bears a marked resemblance to the Japanese woodblock print *Under the Wave off Kanagawa*. In Ai's work, swirling green waves grow taller and taller, their crashing imminent. While the piece is small in scale, the waves' dramatic movements suggest an impending catastrophe, though the exact nature of the destruction is unforeseen.



*View of Tide*, Yang Yongliang, 2008. Photo courtesy of the artist

Similarly, Yang Yongliang's compositions reference landscapes depicted in age-old scrolls. In his *\*View of Tide,\** a print of a composite photograph, what was once mountainous terrain has become an expansive, towering cityscape, with high-rise apartment buildings and power pylons replacing hills and trees.

**Through April 6, 2014, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York.**