

# A Magical Well That Never Runs Dry

'Ink Art,' the Met's First Big Contemporary Chinese Show

By ROBERTA SMITH DEC. 12, 2013

When it comes to the history of Chinese art, there are few traditions as revered as bimo, or brush and ink. From this simple combination of tool and material, China's greatest achievements — landscape painting and calligraphy — flowed for centuries.

Bimo did not have an easy time in the 20th century, thanks initially to European modernism, and then to the Soviet-influenced Socialist Realism imposed by Mao. But things began to loosen up after Mao's death in 1976, and brush and ink have enjoyed a kind of comeback that some artists call "experimental ink painting."

"Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China," at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, examines its resurgence. It presents 70 works by 35 artists, most born in the 1950s and '60s, and several of whom have had little or no exposure in New York. It demonstrates that some artists have found new ways to use brush and ink on paper, while others have conjured its effects in photography, video, animation and even photo-based performance art.

For example, Zhang Huan's well-known "Family Tree," from 2001, which consists of nine color photographs of the artist's face being progressively inked with Chinese words, until it is completely black, as if Mr. Zhang had been consumed by the babble of his language or his thoughts. More benign are two color photographs by Huang Yan from 1999. Showing his torso painted with traditional landscape scenes, they communicate a sweet reverence for nature and painting itself.

The show endures a scattered installation, includes works that don't always rise to the occasion, and wanders off message in spots, especially with several sculptures that don't seem to belong here. This ploy seems to allow for some signature objects by Ai Weiwei, a marquee figure whom the Met may have deemed essential but that the show could have done without.

"Ink Art" is the first survey of contemporary Chinese art at the Met, which has one of the greatest collections of traditional Chinese art in the West and an exhibition program to match. It has been organized by Maxwell K. Hearn, head of the Met's department of Asian art and an expert in Chinese painting and calligraphy. Instead of a suite of temporary exhibition galleries, he has installed his show throughout the Met's Chinese art galleries, sometimes in the company of much older material, or in rooms with profuse Chinese architectural touches and scroll-friendly vitrines that are usually reserved for paintings and calligraphy from the collection.

The installation stretches the show almost to the breaking point, with the first two artists marooned in a gallery near the Great Hall. The architecture also requires arrangements that blur the show's themes: writing, landscape, abstraction and "beyond the brush." But these arrangements also make historic works available for comparison, though it is rarely favorable to the contemporary fare. One example is Mr. Ai's Han jar emblazoned with the Coca-Cola logo — a well-known one-liner — next to the Met's own Han ceramics.

Still, "Ink Art" is something of a landmark in the way it places recent Chinese art against the backdrop of the vaunted brush and ink traditions. Furthermore, it has a formal focus too often

missing from contemporary surveys. And some of the show's unevenness may have benefits. The assembled works end up presenting both sides of a universal problem: how artists find their voices by working with, and against, the art that precedes them, or how they don't find them, relying instead on bravura displays of skill, received ideas or a conceptual framework.

The exhibition begins in the mid-1980s, when the intense period of post-Mao avant-garde catch-up came to fruition, and artists who had absorbed Western artistic ideas, from Duchamp to Pop Art and beyond — most notably, the Conceptual, process and performance strands of Post-Minimalism — began to emerge internationally.

The first of the show's main galleries gets off to a stunning start with three large, mostly black hanging scrolls from Gu Wenda's 1985 "Mythos of Lost Dynasties" series, which combine some giant Chinese characters and extravagantly brushed surfaces with a bit of relatively realistic landscape, all of which resembles a fast-approaching storm.

Adjacent is "Character Image of Black Character Font," from 1989, a single work on six large sheets of paper by Wu Shanzhuan, a conceptualist. This bold concoction of blocky calligraphy in black on red and white appropriates the scaled-up characters and palette of the Cultural Revolution. It also gives you a slight sense of Mr. Wu's "Red Humor" installations of a few years earlier, one of which is reproduced in the exhibition catalog (and bears a resemblance to the six-sided environments that Barbara Kruger would soon be making). Further adventures in calligraphy include the enormous, swashbuckling abstractions of Wang Dongling, and Xu Bing's 1991 "Book From the Sky," an immersive installation of hand-printed books and wall and ceiling scrolls whose invented characters are equally illegible to Easterners and Westerners.

The abundance of highly skilled artifice in these works may reflect Mr. Hearn's familiarity with classic Chinese material, and lack of same with all kinds of contemporary art. But like them or not, these bravura works will at least briefly grab your attention. Skill does that. The grabbiest is an exquisite hand scroll by Yang Yongliang, who was born in 1980 and trained in traditional Chinese landscape painting before turning to the digital photomontage technique in "A View of Tide." This hyper-refined tribute to a 12th-century Song dynasty hand scroll comments on the rapid development of the new China: Soon you see that the rocky islands and dense forests are actually high-rise apartment buildings and power-line towers.

Other contenders are Liu Dan's overwrought "Ink Handscroll" (1990), a dense, partly orange landscape with a plethora of O'Keeffe-like forms that might almost be an illustration for a science fiction story, and Ren Jian's more serenely cosmic "Primeval Chaos" of 1987-88. The big ink-on-paper panels of Zhang Yu depict dark, chunky forms that suggest an exploding meteor or stacked slabs of cracked asphalt, rendered with a nearly photographic tightness that makes them overly dramatic. Mr. Liu's 1991 "Dictionary," an immense ink and watercolor rendering of a small dictionary, is less showy but is even more easily mistaken for a photograph.

There are engaging antidotes to such high finish. Duan Jianyu, one of the few women in the show, contributes fragmented images of traditional Chinese landscape isolated on pieces of cardboard. Liu Wei's "Untitled No. 6 'Flower,'" a 2003 hand scroll inhabited by a tribe of exuberantly androgynous creatures amid thickets of drawing, writing and landscape in assorted mediums, feels exceptionally personal in this context. Li Huasheng's four hanging scrolls from 2006 present a minute grid, drawn freehand with obvious concentration. These netlike surfaces are as much feats of endurance as anything, and as you look at them, hints of architecture and other forms start to emerge.

Many of the works simply put a Chinese spin on familiar art-making strategies, especially the remade readymade sculpture. Here, this means round-back Chinese armchairs in stainless steel, scholar's rocks cast in purple silicon (like Rachel Whiteread's mattresses) or stainless steel (like Jeff Koons's "Louis XIV") and a handsome ceremonial robe made in clear plastic and embroidered with pale green vinyl fishing wire.

There's a similar familiarity to the expertly hand-drawn animations of Chen Shaoxiong, who is overly dependent on photographs, and Qiu Anxiong, who conjures a more fanciful world in a manner reminiscent of William Kentridge. More gripping is Sun Xun's "Some Actions Which Haven't Been Defined Yet in the Revolution," which animates woodblock prints and (it seems) actual wood blocks, and Yang Fudong's video "Liu Lan," a romantic encounter between real actors set on a pale lake where water, mist and sky are one.

"Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China" runs through April 6 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; 212-535-7710, [metmuseum.org](http://metmuseum.org).

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