

Reboot-The Third Chengdu Biennale: A Review

Michael Hatch



Li Huai, *After M. Butterfly*, 2007, ink, paper, salt, 200 x 200 x 5 cm. Photo: Shen Kuiyi.

Reboot: The Third Chengdu Biennale occurred from September 14 to October 12, 2007 at the Chengdu Century City exhibition centre. Works by over one hundred artists, from the internationally established to the up and coming, were gathered together to address “the problem of contemporary *guohua*,” also referred to as “Chinese ink painting,” or simply “ink and wash.” This year marked a shift from past Chengdu Biennales that emphasized contemporary Chinese art using oil and mixed media. For Reboot, the assumption was in the title—contemporary approaches to ink painting metaphorically may have crashed.

According to director Feng Bin’s introductory note in the catalogue, Reboot’s purpose was to “make an objective overview of different responses to the *guohua* problem and try to find how this traditional culture may further develop.” The problem he refers to is whether ink painting remains a relevant medium or idea, as it is often perceived as too attached to the past and lacking engagement with the present. This assumption is so ingrained that to international eyes any work executed in the medium carries with it connotations of conservatism, regardless of the content, technique, or image.

A preliminary look at the exhibition shows that the curators chose to redress “the problem” by bringing together the broadest possible range of conceptual and technical approaches to the ink medium. The massive hangar-sized hall was dominated by a core exhibition divided into three broad themes—Humanity and Spirit, Society, and Nature. Special exhibitions complemented this core, including one with several dozen Taiwanese artists as well as one featuring young and emerging artists.

The event boasted an international presence despite its distance from the center of the international Chinese art world. The team of curators included Kuiyi Shen (University of California, San Diego), Britta Erickson (independent scholar), and Lu Hong (Shenzhen Art Museum). These curators in turn brought an international roster of participants, attracting artists from across the Asian diaspora, and academics from both sides of



Pan Gongkai, *Lotus*, 2007, ink on paper, 858 x 1074 cm. Photo: Kuiyi Shen.

the strait as well as the U.S.A. While the attention of the greater contemporary Chinese art scene may not have been focused on Reboot, there was, in any case, enough of a critical mass in the way of ink and wash artists, academics, and curators to provide productive discussion about new approaches and epiphanies pertaining to the medium.

The dominant feature of Reboot was the breadth and diversity of approaches to the ink medium that were on display. The exhibition included artists working with mediums as diverse as oil, collage, installation, photography, and video, as well as with the traditional ink and paper. Some artists identified themselves only as ink and wash painters, others as oil painters, and some would absolve their relationship to ink and wash entirely, considering the medium simply a supplementary material to the central concept and execution of their work. Artists such as Li Huayi, whose finely painted landscapes are a contemporary manifestation of Song dynasty monumental landscape painting, could be found not far from installation and mixed media artists such as Chen Shaoxiong, whose quick ink sketches are simply one of many supporting elements to his larger artistic vision. The two artists share little in common in their approach to ink. But the contrast between them and between other artists as well created significant opportunities to examine the international interest towards ink, no matter what way it was manipulated.

There were several visible tendencies among the range of contemporary ink works:

Calligraphic/Expressionist

Calligraphy and control over brush and ink is traditionally seen as the basis of any successful ink painting. In the world of contemporary ink though, glorification of brushwork can be seen as overly traditional. Many artists in the last twenty years have tended towards heroic and gestural ink painting, often finding kinship with Western abstract expressionism. In the present exhibition that trend is still pronounced, and artists working in this fashion lend ink and brush a near mythic potency.

Upon entering the main exhibition hall, Pan Gongkai's massive ink mural, *Lotus* (2007), was visible at the far side of the hall, looming high above the rest of the show. The piece measures over ten by eight and a half metres and uses dense and powerful large-scale brush work to render an image of the common traditional theme of a lotus pond. The huge scale, density, and power of the brushwork imply the weight that traditional themes impose, and equally declare their sustained power and relevance in the contemporary world.



Wei Ligang, *Black Bottom*, 2007, ink on paper, four panels 360 x 120 each. Photo: Julia Andrews.

Wei Ligang is a strong example of an artist who places the power of brushwork at the forefront. His work, *Black Blossoms* (2007), begins with a loose grid of large-brush calligraphic circles painted in dark ink. The negative space is then filled with a bright gold acrylic colour that highlights and reverently frames the form of the ink circles.

Weak or Subversive Brushwork

Equal to the number of aggressive calligraphic works were those that attempted what appeared to be expressionist manipulation of ink, but that were executed with seemingly flaccid and aimless lines, traditionally referred to as weak brushwork. Such works attempt to appear bold and confident, but when traditional brushwork analysis is applied, the bravado dissipates. From a contemporary standpoint though, these works can be seen as subversive in comparison to a traditional and sometime zealous emphasis on brushwork.

Calligraphic works by Yang Shih-chih and the ink and mixed media series by Mao Xiaolang fall into this category. Yang Shih-chih's expressive *Ink Landscape* (2007) is particularly soft. The execution of line carries little or no strength, nor does it cohere into a single composition. Instead, the brushwork subverts the impact of the landscape's scale through its contrasting weakness.

Mao Xiaolang's pseudo-ink paintings combine ink and mixed media on a low-absorbency surface that allows for extensive wet manipulation of the monochromatic ink. By scraping away and scribbling through large areas of wet ink, the artist emphasizes the repetition of his own mark. These marks, however, are not powerful expressions of brushwork. Instead, they are of little tactile value or stem from a rational process that is visually contrary to traditional calligraphic line. The result is a seemingly traditional expressionist ink landscape that in fact undermines the status of brushwork.

Boneless Technique

Boneless technique traditionally refers to ink painting that is executed in blended washes of colour rather than the accumulation of monochromatic outline and subsequent textural layers or washes. In the past, it was almost exclusively applied to floral painting and small landscapes. But in



Mao Xiaolang, *Grass Dragon Series*, 2006, ink and mixed media on paper, 160 x 110 cm. Photo: Kuiyi Shen.

contemporary ink practice it successfully extends to depictions of human social interactions and urban landscape.

Li Jin's tableaux are bacchanalian scenes of feasting and excess punctuated with portly, rosy-cheeked figures and robust women. In the long handscroll, *Delicious* (2007), women in fishnet stockings wear flashing devil horns while lazy-eyed lapdogs stare on and doe-eyed seals beg for alcoholic drinks. Li Jin's colour wash manipulation is equally as lush as the subjects of his quotidian feasts. Condensed table and floral spaces combine delicate and pale purples that abut against dense greens and yellows that are in turn set off by intense crimsons. Li Jin's cornucopia is preceded with a prompting poem, a traditionally common practice now often disregarded: "... my dear flying by, beware the roses ahead, drunk as you are on the fragrant flowers ..."

Feng Bin's boneless style concentrates more on a direct and single explosive central image. In *Dance No. 9*, a saturated explosion of magenta, purple, orange, and yellow stands against a white



Li Jin, *Delicious* (detail), 2006, ink and colour on paper, 56 x 1200 cm. Photo: Kuiyi Shen.

ground. The image appears to be a loosely defined rendition of a couple dancing and is clearly derived from a photographic source. Although he is an ink painter and ink painting professor, the materials in this work are acrylic and silk, thereby pushing the boundaries of ink as it is applied to other materials.

Figural Themes

Following the rise of figural subjects used for political purposes through most of twentieth century Chinese art, figurative art has maintained prominence in all aspects of the arts, including ink. The works of Feng Bin and Li Jin attest to that, as do the works of Cao Baoquan or Zhou Jingxin, who both define their figures by layering broad and wet ink lines in loose and idiosyncratic manners.

Conservative/Literati

Despite the lack of a contemporary literati context—an educational foundation of Confucian scholarship and traditional literature—the culture of literati-style painting still lives on in practice. Oddly enough, the strongest manifestation of contemporary literati painting in the show exists in the work of Arnold Chang, a New York native. Chang’s landscapes are monochromatic landform compositions built on the formal play of “centered” brushwork. They typify what detractors of the medium immediately identify as overly traditional. But Chang’s technical mastery and personalized approach to the literati tradition are all the more engaging because they make several points: One, that the methodology of finding one’s own voice through the intense study and reinvention of classical themes and techniques is still a relevant way to approach the world; and two, that image and technique do not have to possess novelty to be contemporary.



Feng Bin, *Dance No. 9*, acrylic on silk, 140 x 180 cm. Photo: Julia Andrews.

Purification

In contrast to the often romantic and heroic responses that ink can instigate, particularly in its expressionist manifestations, many artists have chosen to take a more minimalist or rationalist approach to the material, condensing technique to create a single effect and avoiding subjective or romantic expressionism.

Li Huasheng's work has recently taken a shift in this minimalist direction. His mural-sized works are hand-painted grids of vertical and horizontal lines. But in the variations of hand movement the grid becomes uneven. These variations create evocative and natural shifts in depth and perspective that the brain wants to visually comprehend, especially as landscape. Such work purifies technique to a rational distillation of repeated form.

Mixed Media

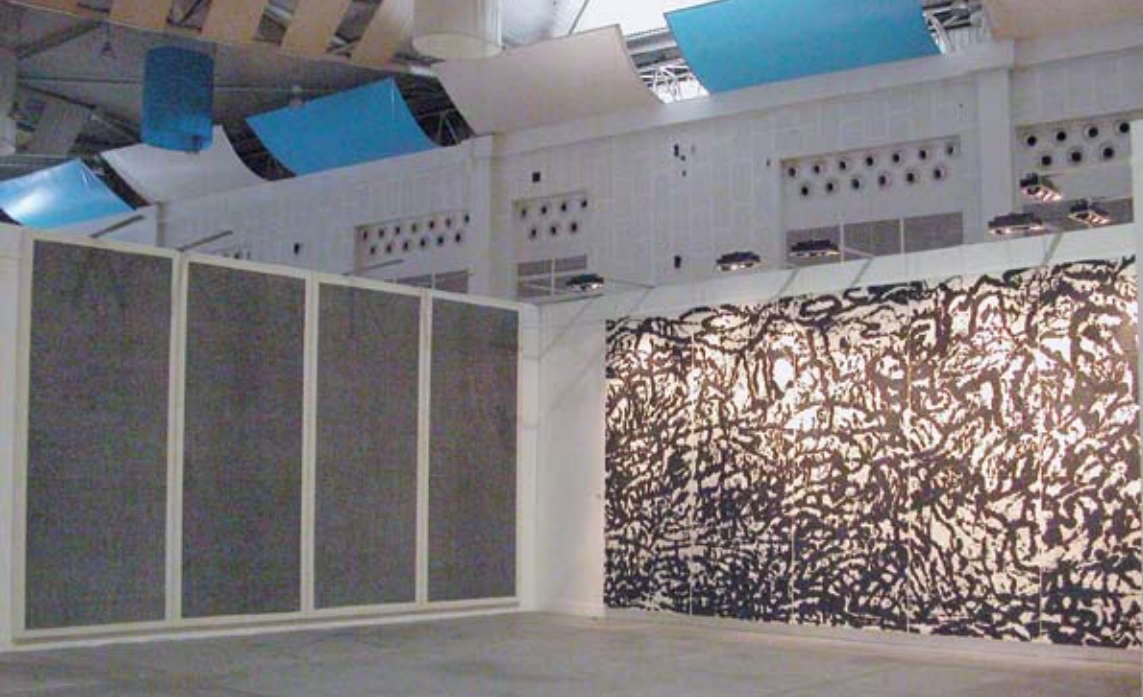
It is the mixed media artists whose works somehow relate to ink materials or ideas that are receiving the most international attention, even though imagery and execution they resemble ink painting the least. Artists working in this way are the natural ambassadors between the larger world of contemporary art and those committed to ink painting.

The work of Chen Shaoxiong was even showcased at the ShContemporary Art Fair in Shanghai, which preceded the Chengdu Biennial by half a week, proving that his status is anchored more in the world of contemporary installation and video rather than ink. Ink on paper is simply a means for Chen to sketch scenes rapidly and expressively. He then uses the ink sketches from his daily life as still images for dreamily narrated video sequences, such as his *Ink, Water, East, West* (2007), exhibited in its video format at Reboot. The artist himself favours ink for its ease of use, rather than any reasons related to tradition.

The works of Shanghai oil painter Zhou Tiehai, famous for his *Joe the Camel* paintings, were also exhibited. In *Lotus* (2005), the artist uses acrylic paint to imitate the work of Badashanren, a famous seventeenth century monk artist. By choosing a single detail and painting it delicately, the artist imitates the effects of ink on paper. With this work it is evident that even the most avant-garde artists are continuing a dialogue with the ink medium, themes, and tradition.



Arnold Chang, *Landscape*, 2007, ink on paper, 141 x 70.5 cm.
Photo: Julia Andrews.



Li Huasheng, installation view of *Four Seasons*, 2006, ink on paper, 360 x 120 cm. Photo: Kuiyi Shen.

An ink performance at the opening further expanded the idea of ink while being approached from non-ink media. In *Walking with the Ink* (2007), Wu Shaoying projected the varied confluences of a tub of Coke, milk, yogurt, and Fanta on a large wall to the accompaniment of Qin music. This tongue-in-cheek performance poked fun at the spiritual and cultural perceptions of ink and tradition by executing it, quite literally, in Pop media.

Internationalism

One last tendency worth noting is that the ink artists came from highly diverse backgrounds. Aside from New York natives such as Lin Yan, who sculpts and molds in *xuan* paper, or Zhang Hongtu, who paints traditional Chinese masterworks in oil paint in the style of Van Gogh or Monet, there was also the inclusion of Michael Cherney, a non-Chinese artist who does not work in ink. Instead he uses the format of folding albums with specially treated *xuan* paper upon which he prints photographs. His atmospheric landscape albums can only be classified as photography, but in format, composition, and material, and even in their ink printing, they share many basic elements with ink painting.

Two major supplementary exhibitions accompanied the core exhibition and provided some expanded content: a special section of contemporary Taiwanese ink painters organized by Liu Guosong, and the selection of young ink artists organized by director Feng Bin .

The group of Taiwanese artists was highly influenced by the Fifth Moon Group of the 1950s and 1960s, for which Liu Guosong was the chief figurehead. Works largely used collage and intense colour, shying away from expressive or monochromatic brushwork and towards multi-paper media. The emerging artists exhibition was full of younger artists emulating successful ink artists of the previous generation, and most of them lacked the virtuosity of their role models. While that is in keeping with the way in which ink painting technique is passed on—a process of emulation, mastery, and then self-discovery—it also left little opportunity for introspection into the directions of future generations.

There were a few artists, though, who seemed to combine both a technical ability and a new approach to style. Yu Hongbo's ink on paper painting, *Swing No.1* (2007), could easily be mistaken for acrylic or oil in his heavy application of textured washes to create disturbing and scarred

figures with enlarged heads. Qiao Yuan's landscapes, such as her *Entering the New Era* series (2007), are atmospheric, with subdued colour washes and delicate lines, and resemble bird and flower techniques, but are applied to the content of highways, those border zones between the urban and the natural that are proliferating across China's landscape.

The above tendencies that artists are involved in demonstrate that ink is fully capable of being part of a contemporary discourse. While not all of the one hundred plus artists included were worthy of attention, nationally or internationally, the quality and cross-contextual relationships provided a context for appreciating the contemporaneity of ink.

Ultimately, though, and in the context of the larger agenda of contemporary Chinese art, Reboot remained a peripheral event, and many of its valuable contributions were left unacknowledged except by those who are already engaged with ink. Reboot occurred just after the high-profile events such as the ShContemporary Art Fair and Hou Hanru's Istanbul Biennial, events considered far more important by the majority of the contemporary Chinese art world. The Chengdu Biennale also chose a theme not fully respected by international media and curators.

As seen in this exhibition, ink as a medium is able to achieve the broadest of effects, from the lush sensuality of Li Jin to the calculated grids of Li Huasheng. Ink also maintains its conceptual impact and richness for artists such as Arnold Chang, who is one of the few artists who truly continues the important lineage of literati painting in the present, as well as for artists such as Wu Shaoying, whose multi-media installation explores the cultural relevance of ink.

To extend the computer metaphor, perhaps excessively, ink painting is less in need of a reboot as it is a reconfiguration. Not unlike the broader contemporary Chinese art scene, it is the approach and critical dialogue around ink painting that needs redress.



Chen Shaoxing, *Ink, Water, East, West*, 2007, video.
Photo: Kuiyi Shen.



Zhou Tiehai, *Lotus*, 2007, acrylic on canvas, two panels,
160 x 90 each. Photo: Kuiyi Shen.

Such new approaches are necessary because twentieth century ink and wash painting as a field and medium has been repeatedly written off and reassessed, and while refusing to pass into extinction, it has also never graduated to the stage of international acceptance or understanding. In Western circles, contemporary ink is almost always considered within a narrative of traditional ink painting. It is usually championed by museum curators and academics who see a natural connection in materials and concepts with their permanent collections of classical ink. It is a medium best understood by those already familiar with it, which moves many to wonder whether the ink painting is forever limited in full appreciation only to those with the relevant cultural understanding.

In keeping with that line of thought, ink painting remains highly popular throughout Asia, where greater familiarity with the medium exists. Contrary to international assumptions, ink as a whole in fact still outstrips oil painting and contemporary art in terms of quantity and price in mainland Chinese markets. The highest twentieth century ink painting to sell at auction, an album by Lu Yanshao, sold for RM 69 million (USD 8.5 million) in 2004, while the recent contemporary Chinese art record set by Yue Minjun's work is USD 5.9 million. But even if contemporary ink only continues to retain the attention of those audiences with a background of interest in Chinese art, it is none-the-less contemporary and appreciated as such by much of the Asian world. It is therefore a necessary part of the overall dialogue about contemporary Chinese art. The decision for Reboot: The Third Chengdu Biennale to shift from its past focus on other contemporary media to ink attests to this fact.

Such a diverse group of artists and approaches made the curators' task a challenge. Even a cursory pass through the show made it clear that the difficulty of directing people through contemporary approaches to ink was tackled only with partial success. The "all inclusive" approach created a dynamic environment, but it was one without much of a curatorial guiding hand.



Wu Shaoying, *Walking with the Ink*, 2007, performance and video. Photo by Britta Erickson.

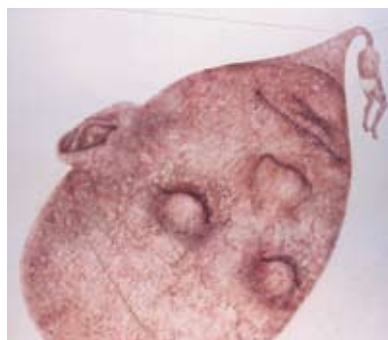


Lin Yan, *The Stele No. 1*, 2007, rice paper, 76 x 67 x 6 cm. Photo: Shen Kuiyi.



Michael Cherney, *Mountain Series*, 2005, photograph on xuan paper, 26 x 494 cm. Photo: Kuiyi Shen.

Paintings in the main exhibition were divided into the three broad and vaguely defined groups mentioned earlier: Humanity and Spirit, Society, and Nature. As it stood Humanity and Spirit included artwork of expressive and rational approaches, as well as including the spiritual. Society included signs of the figural, quotidian, and social. Nature consisted of works from the categories of landscape and still life, as well as abstractions, and presented them as a reading of the human context naturalized in landscape forms.



Yu Hongbo, *Swing No.1*, 2007, colour on paper, 180 x 240 cm. Photo: Julia Andrews.

But these groupings and the text panels that accompanied them were ineffective in either providing direction or conceptual guidance to the paintings included in the exhibition. An excerpt from the text for Humanity and Spirit, for example, went as follows: “daily life, and the excitement, confusion and restlessness of consumer culture often turn familiar images into the strange. Wandering in the realm of the spirit is to enjoy infinite possibilities. The abstraction of the rational, the dream’s distortion of time and space, and the drifting spirit-wandering of the subconscious, all, collectively, create a boundless space for the free flow of ink.”

These divisions may well have been meant to emphasize connections of common individual artistic practices rather than a division by visual theme or material, but their poetic descriptions offered little more than vague intimations of what such divisions of artistic practice entailed. It was, instead, the simple coexistence of such a diverse group of contemporary artworks and artists that provided important spaces for inter-media and inter-contextual dialogue. In that sense the curatorial team provided a ripe environment for fomentation through their diversity of choice.

Aside from the aforementioned tendencies in technique and theme, several larger questions could be felt hanging in the air. In particular, just what does tradition have to do with ink?

In the overall contemporary world, tradition is seen as antithetical to progress and therefore to contemporaneity. Yet tradition is present in many aspects of work by international avant-garde Chinese artists as well, and is often present as a precursor to its international acceptance. Contemporary Chinese art is, after all, still expected to demonstrate its Chineseness. But in contemporary Chinese art in other media, tradition is more often viewed in a positive way, as a reinvention of themes, or an exploration of cultural roots. Take Zhang Huan’s 2003 sculpture *Peace*, for instance, where a gilded nude casting of the artist is positioned to strike a bronze bell cast with the names of artists’ ancestors. Such a didactic manipulation of tradition is embraced internationally because the medium is accessible. Yet the confrontations with tradition that occur in the field of contemporary ink, in both theme and technique, are perceived as less dynamic.

No one expects ink to supplant other forms of contemporary Chinese art. But considering the following it has among Chinese audiences in particular, it should be taken at least as seriously as contemporary Chinese art of other media.

When seen from a different perspective, the ink medium actually has greater potential to satisfy the contemporary interest in Chinese art than any other media. In a contemporary art scene where signs of Chineseness are often a prerequisite of international acceptance for work by Chinese artists, ink painting embodies Chineseness in its basic materials of Chinese brush, Chinese paper,

and Chinese ink. That leaves the artist freedom to avoid didactic symbols of Chineseness should they choose to do so.

At the heart of the issue is the fact that untrained eyes have great difficulty in appreciating the differences between ink as manipulated by a master and its more commonplace use. That, in turn, is attached to the fact that contemporary international art emphasizes the initial impact of image while ink painting traditionally emphasizes the subtle play of materials. As one friend mentioned on her first viewing, “I want to be more impressed.”

Reboot co-curator Britta Erickson points out this phenomenon and offers a start to a solution. She notes that, in the case of ink, “it is rare for any aspect of a *guohua* painting to trump mastery of brush and ink (technique) in ultimately determining the quality and impact of a work in this mode.” She then goes on to encourage unfamiliar viewers to appreciate the nuances of ink through whatever access the viewer can resource.

If anything, though, the artwork presented at Reboot attests to the fact that artists themselves do not feel confined by the simple dichotomies of tradition and modernity, even if many critics are. Co-curator Shen Kuiyi points to this and advocates “leaving behind the anxiety that is the ink ‘complex,’” and instead to focus on the work as a product of the individual artist. He concludes, “only through the constant, direct contact and friction between different cultures can they reach a state of comprehension, integration and mutual benefit.”

Shen’s attitude of perseverance and advocacy for a continued inter-cultural dialogue unhindered by the old configurations that contextualize ink, are also part of the sustenance that Reboot had to offer for the rest of the Chinese art world. But the chief achievement of Reboot was to bring together into one space many works and concepts necessary to create a deeper and more meaningful bi-cultural understanding of contemporary *guohua*, which, to those paying attention, does appear to be in a dynamic state of change, and is producing significant dialogues and tendencies.

But it remains to be seen whether these tendencies are noticed by anyone except those already involved with the medium. Certainly a continued pursuit of these dialogues at a large-scale biennial or exhibition level, both within and outside of China, and, more importantly, within the larger contemporary art community, will lead to a deeper international understanding of ink as a medium and concept. For now Reboot: The Third Chengdu Biennale has put the important subject of the “ink problem” out for discussion in a large-scale international event. But if ink artists truly want to establish and maintain their international relevance, they will have to satisfy and engage those who “want to be more impressed,” whether by image, by technique, by education, or by curation. Whether such engagement is pandering or a natural development of the medium is hard to say. But it is evident that without continued evolution and dialogue, ink will remain an obscure medium appreciated only by those already educated in its ways and by those few who are drawn enough to its subtleties to seek such an education.