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BY FAREED ZAKARIA

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TIME



WHY GERMANY CAN'T SAVE THE WORLD*

BY MICHAEL SCHUMAN

* Not just because it doesn't want to



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Art

Brush with Modernity. The new look of ancient Chinese ink painting

By Hillary Brenhouse

IN ADOLESCENCE, CHINESE INK PAINTER Zheng Chongbin was asked by his teacher to buy an ink stick, a stone against which to grind it, a set of brushes and sheets of rice paper. But during lessons for the better part of two years, he was not allowed to use them. Instead, he was commanded to pore over Tang-dynasty masterworks and absorb their every visual nuance. His eye and concentration exhaustively trained, Zheng was finally allowed to pick up his brush—but only to copy those same ancient pieces with scrupulous precision.

Though he came to the archaic tradition of Chinese ink painting by painfully slow and patient degrees, Shanghai-born Zheng quickly left the old teachings behind. With an M.F.A. from the San Francisco Art Institute, and dividing his time between China and the U.S., he has assimilated artistic influences from both sides of the world, his work straying a long distance from the mist-shrouded mountains and willow trees of classical Chinese landscapes. He calls his current renderings of dark whorls and biomorphic blotches “the style of no style.”

Zheng is one of a number of artists from mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan—among them Wucius Wong, Huang Zhiyang, Qiu Zhijie and Liu Qinghe—working in the medium. Chinese ink painting is, for the first time, making headway in the global contemporary-art scene. There has been a dramatic rise in exhibitions dedicated to it—including shows at the British Museum, the Guggenheim and the Musée Guimet in Paris—and though the genre remains undervalued, prices fetched at auction have been climbing.

In 2008, Li Huayi's *Autumn Mountains*, fusing traditional techniques and Western modernism, sold at Sotheby's for a record \$451,000. Earlier this year, Boston's Museum of Fine Arts staged a major exhibition, “Fresh Ink: Ten Takes on Chinese Tradition,” featuring pieces that nine Chinese and one Chinese American created



in response to works in the museum's permanent collection. New York City-born Arnold Chang used ink and wash to riff off a 1949 Jackson Pollock drip painting. Chinese art professor Qin Feng, who spends part of the year in Boston, drew inspiration from an ancient bronze to produce a large polyptych that he lashed with ink, coffee, tea and soil.

That China's ink artists should be toying with the form—eschewing studies of bamboo and pond fish for violent, erratic splatterings—is no accident. By shedding classical constraints and producing works of unprecedented movement and energy, these pioneers reflect their country's own transformation. For a showcase in Shanghai in 2010, He Xiangyu painted with a pigment made from tens of thousands of liters of condensed Coca-Cola. Artists have manipulated shadows to appear as ink; they have used fresh snow for paper. The medium has become more flexible, inventive and global in scope—much like a modern China in dizzy expansion.

Some argue that the stark new direc-

China ink The new style of ink painting stems directly from China's relentless modernization

tion of Chinese ink painting still draws on the art form's abundant history, abstract expressionist streaks aside. “All artists, when they choose this medium, automatically link themselves to Chinese culture and philosophy,” says Asian-art historian Kuiyi Shen of the University of California at San Diego, claiming that the nature of the medium—the worrisome fragility of the paper, the need to control ink flow—imposes automatic restrictions. But the artists are undeterred. Indeed, ink—basic, cheap and plentiful—seems entirely suited to extravagant experimentation. “It speaks the contemporary language,” says Zheng, who has staged three solo exhibitions this year alone. His particular vocabulary is visceral and abstract. A new piece, *White Ink on Black Ink*, is made up of four panels soaked in blackness. The Tang-dynasty masters may object, but their cries are drowned in a dense, iridescent night.