

Negotiating between Light and Ink

Tan Hwee Koon

"I live in California, the light has a magical transcendental quality... Some moment I feel I really can touch the light. It is beyond beautiful, so is the shadow. That is what I meant that I could sense the material in the light...[1]"

Zheng Chongbin, 2012

It is difficult to put into words the experience of encountering artist, Zheng Chongbin's paintings. It is somewhat familiar and yet foreign at the same time and contradictory in existence. The timeless black and white colour palette, translucency and aesthetics associated with ink as a traditional medium. The matt and shiny textures and colours expressed in the physicality of ink as a contemporary material. The luminosity that comes from within the work itself like a halo glowing in dim light. Accompanied by the dramatic unfolding of light and shadows on the painting surface. Otherwise defined geometrical forms infused with subtle emotions. The presentation of works as objects with the xuan paper mounted on wooden frames in dialogue with the context of the larger spatial environment that it is placed in. Although Zheng Chongbin's works are essentially two-dimensional and one would expect them to function as objects and not environment, the tactile surface of the iridescent black and white ink paintings oscillating between opacity and luminosity has the ability to suck the viewer in and at the same time extends beyond its frame to integrate with the surrounding environment—causing the viewers to shift between object and environment perception. It is a very personal experience of discovery. Like seeing Zheng Chongbin's works in his blackout Shanghai Studio without electricity supply on 9th August 2012, the day after the destructive Typhoon Hai Kui hit Shanghai – light seems to emit from paintings, glowing in the dark with a luminosity that floods one with emotions.

The current Beijing exhibition is a culmination of the conceptual take and shifts in the artist's work over the past two years from 2011 to 2012, developed into a full-blown scale in this important landmark Beijing exhibition for artist Zheng Chongbin. Zheng was inspired to create works in response to unique spatial conditions of the German built Bauhaus style former state-owned electronics factory unit constructed in 1958, now gallery space of the Asia Art Center in the 798 Art District in Beijing. In this large exhibition space with very high ceiling level of up to seven metres, the artist is able to play with all the elements that he developed to date. Zheng would intervene directly with the gallery space, and painting the walls of the gallery as a larger canvas where the individual or groups of work would be positioned in context. With a palette ranging between black and white, the artist would effectively make works "disappear" (black-on-black) or "appear" (black-on-white) in relation to the painted walls. This would heighten the viewer's sensitivity to the idea of "surface" and "physicality" of the medium ink [2]. All three concurrently on-going series in the artist's visual language system are presented in the Beijing exhibition – Architectonics Series (2009/ 2010-), Geometry Series (2011 -) and Variations Series (2012 -).

Depending on the site conditions, the multi-lingual artist, Zheng Chongbin would respond in the respective visual language. The **Architectonics Series** was first developed about two-three years ago in 2009/ 2010 with the concept that the paintings are just an element of the architectural component of the space that completes it. Hence the work is not completed in the studio but instead in the actual space. The paintings are cut and re-arranged like the tectonic plates, converging, diverging and transforming into various structural build-up. Zheng plays with the dual qualities of ink – the visibility and invisibility and presents medium ink as an object. The **Geometry Series** evolved one year ago when Zheng Chongbin started his exploration on the relationship between painting and border. Zheng experimented with the combination of the definite geometrical forms of the painting with the amorphous quality of the medium ink. Zheng regards geometry as the primary language, sense and logic of Western Art, associated with minimalism, a definitive myth, a sense of order, repetitiveness and a spatial understanding devoid of emotion [3]. On the other hand, ink painting has the qualities of being organic, flowing, accessible and filled with subtle resonance associated with the notion of traditional Art from the East. He attempts to break the rigid boundaries of the geometric forms with the amorphous qualities of ink. And aspires to capture the physicality of light through the interplay of light and shadows, translucency of ink and opacity of white acrylic. Exploring the relationship between the painting and the square paper and what is revealed and hidden at the same time. The third **Variation Series** came about this year is inspired by the

variation from ink as a medium and associated concepts of (Spirit) Resonance or vitality. Variation refers to the tradition in qualities of ink rhythm and momentum.

The highlights of this Beijing exhibition would be the works from the Geometric Series, which began in 2011. Positioned in the entrance and central area of the main exhibition gallery. *Slanted Rectangular*, 2012 comprises of two “seemingly overlapping” irregular-shaped quadrilateral panels – the black on the “foreground” and the white in the “background. The darkened shadows defining the borders of the “luminous” white panel seems to contain the “expansive white light” within. On the other hand, the white acrylic seems to diffuse through the surface from within the depths of the black panel covered with layers of harden Chinese black ink. The white panel, with both qualities of transparency and opacity becomes almost immaterial taking on the quality of pure light like Robert Irwin’s (b.1928) use of scrim fabric lit from both front and back to simulate daylight [4]. On the other hand, the black panel is saturated with drama and tension from the use of “dark-light composition technique” characteristic of Tenebrists led by Baroque masters Caravaggio (1571-1610) and Rembrandt (1606-1669). The painting is kept dark with only an area on the top right corner strongly illuminated in comparison. The “dense emotional black mass” seems to float on the illuminated void of the white border framing the top leading to infinity. The physically interlocking panels are displaced to a point when the balance almost tips over, suggesting momentum. The “white void” in traditional Chinese ink painting is no longer a passive background, but an active participant – the “surfacing of white” [5]. *Lighted and Slanted Surfaces*, 2012 is a group of three parallel interlocking quadrilaterals orientated on a tilted axis. The repetitive geometric modular units seem to effectively convey the cyclic motion of the day-night-day changes. The black panel is sandwiched in between two white rectangular panels – one with the opacity of floating clouds and the other transparency of light flowing through. The cracked surface of the black panel layered with thick Chinese ink expresses a certain vulnerability of the material. White acrylic seeping through the cracked black Chinese ink surface results in a formation of irregular patterns on the pictorial surface. From a certain perspective or illumination angle, the iridescent black ink panel appears brownish as a result of the colour effect of multiple layers. The active viewer would have different viewing experience according to their position in relation to the painting in the gallery space as well as different time of the day or night. The quadrilateral forms may remind one of Malevich’s “yellow quadrilateral” oil on canvas painting (Supremus, 1917), and more recently the contrasting luminous light and dark shadows cast through the through the roof aperture of an enclosed space in James Turrell’s (b.1943) “Skyspace” series. Both expressions of the respective artists’ physical experience of light like Zheng.

The next two groups of works from the Geometric series that are completed recently in response to the Beijing exhibition environment following Zheng Chongbin’s visit to the gallery and “quiet mediation” in the space. They could be read as Zheng Chongbin’s re-interpretation of Kazimir Malevich (1878-1935)’s iconic “black square” and “white square” with light and ink. The dark broody square modules *in Module 1 to 3*, 2012 creates a kind of ambiguity for the viewer, through their competing structures: monochromatic surfaces, geometric shapes, “dramatic illumination” and the formations from the interphase of black ink and white acrylic on the xuan paper. Cut outs of geometric shapes are made on the three black square modules: 1 – a parallelogram (quadrilateral with two parallel sides); 2 – an elongated irregular quadrilateral; and 3 – a square. These shapes are placed back onto the pictorial composition with a slight twist to reveal a sharp white outline of light. At a certain angle, one could see the brownish light from the iridescent material ink. Viewing in a clockwise direction backwards, we see permutations of the iconic “black square or quadrilateral” transforming from ground zero in Module 3 to other possibilities in Module 2 and 1. Tilted on an axis this visual transformation is also accompanied by “overlapping geometric shapes” creating an optical illusion of movement. On the other hand, Zheng attempts to release *Extended Space*, 2012 from the frame so that the painting is in direct contact with the wall and floor of the exhibition gallery. This permutation seems to been more subtle in its predominantly light grey tones and yet drastic in approach of inviting the viewing to enter directly into the pictorial frame –through the hollow cut out of the last square that has become integrated as part of the wall and floor of the gallery space. Zheng Chongbin has successfully “walk out of the frame” with the above two more recent “outward looking” paintings in his Geometry series in comparison, traditional Chinese ink painting are more “inward looking”.

The most prominent feature of the Beijing exhibition is the gallery space located in the former Bauhaus style factory designed to let in maximum amount of natural light. Zheng Chongbin’s works from the Variation Series and Architectonics Series are placed within this unique architecture setting – a high ceiling area of up to seven metres illuminated by light from the row of windows next to the roof. *Dissolved Geometry A, B, C, D* an imposing

group of four narrow paintings in the vertical format from the Architectonics Series is positioned on the whole length of the main feature wall attaining full height. Zheng plays with the interaction between black Chinese ink and white acrylic, “dissolving” into each other. Each panel consists of two 4 feet xuan paper joint slightly misaligned on top of each other. *Dissolved Geometry A* is predominantly white with invasive black ink seeping into pictorial composition. *Dissolved Geometry B*, a black panel with iridescent brown on top part and splashes of dripped white acrylic on pictorial surface. In *Dissolved Geometry C*, the fading black ink seems to be absorbed into the depths of the white acrylic panel and distributed as a greyish tone throughout the pictorial surface. And in *Dissolved Geometry D* a luminous white emerges through the layer of grey. Two intersecting diagonal lines consistently appear on the central axis of the four panels. The areas contained within the two mirror-image triangles formed on the top and bottom half of the panels transform from – predominantly luminous white to opaque black, to opaque greyish-white and to a luminous white light shining through beneath the greyish superficial layer – creating depth and volume and the optical illusion of vortex across the central axis.

On the far right end of this 7 metres high ceiling area, two works from Zheng’s Architectonics Series stands in dialogue with the spatial history of this unique site. *Black Light*, 2012 a composition that seems well balanced in form and clearly ordered at first glance. Tension arises from juxtapositioning of a slanted panel of “greyish-blue” track marks made by the interface of the artist’s dry flat brush on a white acrylic background; next to a black panel made by a wet brush with luminous white light coming through from within. The repetitive up-down motion of the brushstrokes with no beginning and no end give an illusion of extension into the space above, below or next to the painting, going in and out of the pictorial frame. The spatial composition suggests a conceptual mental volume connecting the work with the conditions of the surroundings. *Slanted Light*, 2001-12 formerly shown at the low ceiling exhibition space in Germany is repositioned at this high ceiling area. Light fills in the fissure formed in between the black and white vertical strip in the painting composition in the process light is contained within this composition that suggests the existence of light and attempts to solidify light [6].

The exhibition attempts to describe Zheng Chongbin’s condition of negotiating between light and ink or in Chinese in his work – Chinese ink a traditional medium with the associated cultural background that Zheng was trained in Hangzhou, China; and the physicality of light that he is exposed to in San Francisco California, United States where he is now based. We can see and almost “touch” the physicality of light and ink that he attempts to express through his painting-installation. Why did the artist choose ink and light? Shanghai-born Zheng Chongbin started learning calligraphy, sketching, light and shadow at the age of twelve. And learnt about traditional ink, line and water colour while studying at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now China Academy of Art), Hangzhou. He specialized in figure painting at the Chinese Painting Department at the prestigious Art Academy with long history. Formally known as the National Academy of Art founded in 1928 as the first comprehensive art academy in China on the bank of the West Lake in Hangzhou as a center then in China for teaching Western modernist styles. Zheng Chongbin first introduced acrylic into ink through his experimentations in 1985-86 to express the physicality of ink as an attempt to extend the vocabulary of ink and explore the potential of ink as a material. Before leaving China, Zheng was anti-traditional in his art practice trying to break free from the cultural baggage of the ink tradition. He was interested in the semi abstraction of figures and surrealistic transformation; and brushwork through gestures. Upon arrival in the United States, Zheng Chongbin stopped ink painting and embraced conceptual art, performance art, installation, sculpture and drawing through his International Fellowship and Masters of Fine Arts at the San Francisco Art Institute. The institute that recognized the expanded vocabulary of art making that was a hybrid of many practices including performance, conceptual art, new media, and political and social documentary, was also a centre for Abstract Expressionism after World War II. For Zheng’s M.F.A. graduation work, he created an installation with oxygen tanks and cables to express the material physicality (mass and weight of his work) and internal energy. He was exposed to Californian sunshine and also influenced by the Californian Light and Space movement artists including James Turrell (b.1943), Robert Irwin (b.1928) and Doug Wheeler (b.1939)...And influenced by their focus on perceptual phenomena including light, volume and scale and use of transparent, translucent or reflective material to heighten the viewer’s sensory and experience of light. Explaining for Zheng Chongbin’s art practice that spans a broad range from Chinese ink painting to conceptual installations, and from tradition to the contemporary.

Zheng Chongbin made a conscious decision to go back to Painting as he finds potential in both the similarities and differences in the perceptual systems of art in the transcontinental claim. Similarities in Malevich's paintings which broke free from the painting canon "walked out and change the space and perception; and early Qing dynasty Chinese landscape painter and poet, Shi Tao (1642-1707)'s small album leaves with the line that enter or leave the frame freely hinting at structure extends beyond the painting frame. For Zheng, the commonality that he finds in both James Turrell (b.1943) and late Ming dynasty Chinese ink painter and calligrapher, Bada Sharen (1626-1705) is the discovery of existing elements in the environment. Making minor adjustments to the environment by introducing light and building walls to heighten the viewer's sensory to things that they have not experience before; or the suggestion of visual perspective beyond the viewing frame with germinal brushwork in the subject of landscapes imagery. What Zheng is inspired by the artists from both East and West is "visual perspective, not making art but discovering art". Not from a technical perspective but more from the universal question about painting. It was a natural decision for Zheng to return to Chinese Ink Painting and the special material ink he is familiar with. Ink has the properties of being translucent, transparent or reflective depending on its state. Wet ink can have various level of tonal translucency depending on the amount water it is mixed with. On the other hand, harden dry ink has an iridescent quality with the alternating matt and shiny areas – and under light may look brownish. When ink is combined with the opacity of white acrylic, the interphase and play of resistance between the two mediums create numerous possibilities held together by xuan paper. Zheng is attracted by the physicality of ink as material with the associated opacity, tactility and volume as compared with the transparency and porosity that are usually associated with ink – and finds in Chinese ink a potential for the medium as the subject. Zheng Chongbin's unique hybrid visual language is a result of his personal experiences and dispora position of negotiating "in-between" the physicality of light he is exposed to in California and understanding of his own ink medium conditioned by its cultural duality situated between two continents.

[Footnotes]:

[1]San Fransico-Singapore skype interview with artist, 27.09.12

[2]Singapore interview with artist, 13.10.12

[3]Shanghai Studio interview with artist (Blackout after Typhoon Hai Kui left), 09.08.12

[4] Robert Irwin: Doors of Perception" Art in America, December, 1999, pp. 73-86

[5] Unframe Malevich!: Ineffability and Sublimity in Suprematism Author(s): Branislav Jakovljevic. Reviewed work(s): Source: Art Journal, Vol. 63, No. 3 (Autumn, 2004), pp. 18-31

[6]San Fransico-Singapore skype interview with artist, 08.11.12