

Zheng Chongbin: Revealing the Immeasurable Truth of Seeing

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## ABSTRACT

“I want something that will show what is truth itself.”

- Zheng Chongbin

For artist Zheng Chongbin, truth is visualized through elegant, frenetic dances of blacks, whites, and grays on paper and sculptural transformations of divine spaces. Beginning with the vehicle of ink and its materiality, Zheng explores the potentialities of phenomenological realities in his artworks. His pieces are portraits and scenes of cosmic links and structures intended to question preconditioned biases and awaken human perception of elemental forms and the unnoticed beauty in our environment. This paper follows the evolution of Zheng’s visual philosophy by tracing the thread of influences, spanning disciplines, cultures, and time, behind Zheng’s artistic endeavors. While a body of literature on Zheng’s practice exists, mainly written by art historians with a specialty in contemporary Chinese art, much of it is largely concerned with establishing his position as a revolutionary artist revitalizing and transforming the Chinese ink painting tradition. Interpretative essays and critical writings about Zheng’s artwork most often attempt to fit them within the Chinese artistic canon or are surface aesthetic comparisons to Western post-war artists. However, little to no scholarly research has comprehensively addressed Zheng’s inclination towards transdisciplinary and transhistorical schools of thought and how those ideas are integrated into his methodology. By revealing the rich philosophical constructs behind Zheng’s practice, the paper opens up pathways for new approaches to his artworks. Ultimately, this challenges the narrow categorization of Zheng’s practice as definitively Chinese contemporary art, and instead facilitates the

understanding that his artworks demonstrate a convergence of multiple artistic hereditary lines and global discourses.

## DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my son James, whom I carried and delivered while writing this thesis. Thank you for keeping me company.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION .....	1
2 PAINTINGS: SEEPAGE OF HISTORIES .....	8
3 TRANSITIONS: REORIENTING THE MIND.....	27
4 NEW INSTALLATIONS: IMMEASURABLE TRUTH OF SEEING .....	40
5 CONCLUSION .....	53
REFERENCES .....	57

## INTRODUCTION

“I want something that will show what is truth itself.”

- Zheng Chongbin

For artist Zheng Chongbin, truth is visualized through a frenzied performance of black inks and white acrylics layered on discordant, geometric planes mounted on aluminum plates. Truth for Zheng can also be found through tracing the systemic movement in anatomical structures, the parasitic spread of ink onto porous venous paper or the amplification of delicate concentric waves on the surface of a rock pond. There are multiple strings of energies that connect organisms to one another which ripple across ecosystems. A seepage of structures, ideas, concepts, and even physical matter flow uncontained by the borders of time and space. This connection may be the *qi* for Daoist, quantum particles for physicists, and for Zheng, the connection is embodied in ink. Through the vehicle of ink and its materiality, Zheng explores the potentialities of phenomenological realities in his artworks. Ranging from elegant dances of blacks, whites, and grays on paper to sculptural transformations of divine spaces, Zheng's artworks tend to exude a composed, momentous, and virile presence. They are portraits and scenes of cosmic links and structures intended to challenge preconditioned biases and awaken human perception of elemental forms. Zheng's pieces are abstracted visualizations with an emphasis on form, utilizing massive and micro systems through material, rather than representational subject matter. It is possible to merely enjoy his paintings and installations at an aesthetic level, but much more can be extracted with meditation and introspection of the feelings and sensations his works elicit.

Zheng is not only an artist, but a philosopher and academic.<sup>1</sup> He is voraciously curious about the physical, emotional, and mental landscapes which make up human experiences and how those knowledge bases compare with non-human systems. Art historian Alexander Alberro's definition of contemporary art succinctly encapsulates the premise of Zheng's artistic philosophy:

the new period is witnessing the surprising reemergence of a philosophical aesthetics that seeks to find the "specific" nature of aesthetic experience as such. What the relationship is between this return to a pursuit of aesthetic essence and the proliferation of new-media artworks and visual culture in the past two decades is a key question here. The resurgence of philosophical aesthetics has coincided with a new construction of the spectator. When, for example, prominent contemporary artists claim that "meaning is almost completely unimportant" for their work and that "we don't need to understand art, we need only to fully experience it," they place value on affect and experience rather than interpretation and meaning—rather than contextually grounding and understanding the work and its conditions of possibility.<sup>2</sup>

Zheng's artworks are grounded in philosophical questions of existence and being and place value—not on the meaning of the artwork, but rather the experience of it. Although Zheng's process is inherently philosophical, he does not expect the viewer to understand

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<sup>1</sup> Zheng has written numerous texts about the history of Chinese painting and produced personal essays to accompany his artworks and exhibitions.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Alberro, "Periodizing Contemporary Art," in *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 71.



or grasp the conceptual mediation of those theories in his artworks. Rather, Zheng's pieces center on human perception and the infinite experiences that manifest from each individual's mind. Zheng's practice is ever-expanding, yet he has woven underlying threads in his paintings, videos, and installations. All are tied to and begin with the material of ink and its ontological existence: its history, genealogy, biology, and spirit. Used as a mediator between Zheng's visual philosophy and the viewer's experience, Zheng's immensely detailed dissection of ink expounds on the marriage of the spirituality and aesthetics of his Eastern upbringing and the attitudes and approach of Western art historical practices. This union creates something new and exciting that embodies more dimension and breadth than any singular point on the art historical timeline.

Born in Shanghai, China in 1961, Zheng was trained in classical Chinese painting and calligraphy at an early age. He then studied at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou and upon graduating, stayed on to teach. In 1989, he received a Fellowship from the San Francisco Art Institute, completing his MFA in 1991. For the last three decades he has resided primarily in Marin County, California. Ever inquisitive and a studious reader, Zheng finds inspiration from his physical and intellectual environment. From visits to Stanford University's molecular research lab to dinners with scholars and historians to hikes in Muir Woods, Zheng absorbs all the minute and often overlooked details of nature's social and physical systems and structures, a foundation which informs his interest in phenomenology. Although Zheng's aesthetic is grounded in the Chinese medium of ink, the concepts behind his artwork are an aggregation of the connections formulated from a confluence of diverse references, ranging from Daoism, California Light and Space art, metaphysics, and biology. The method of production of Zheng's

pieces may fit within the Chinese artistic canon, but the philosophy behind them arise from a milieu of transnational and multidisciplinary sources.

Zheng's work is often the output of his exploration of the numerous intersections between a panoply of seemingly dissimilar fields—for instance the commonalities of attitudes and theories between Daoism, Heidegger's phenomenology and traditional Chinese landscape paintings. Zheng is not the first to envisage the possibilities of comparing Heidegger's notion of Being to the Daoist philosophy behind the visualization of nature in Chinese paintings,<sup>3</sup> but he may be the first to attempt to illustrate the idea in the form of art. The comparisons between Eastern spirituality and Western philosophy can be taken further. Present in Chinese landscape paintings is the Daoist paradox of chaos and order, a subject that is also prevalent in Western philosophy and theories. As reflected in Friedrich Nietzsche's writings and Edward Lorenz's butterfly effect, this duality exists across multifarious fields, especially those which study the human agency. Zheng extracts these commonalities found throughout socio-cultures and time and translates and manifests the concepts through the material of ink. He embeds these philosophical thoughts into approachable and serene ink paintings and later, into his installations, hoping to bring to our consciousness a fraction of the immensity of Being present in the most benign experiences.

Moreover, the generative potentialities latent in microbiological and ecological sciences lend well to illustrating the abstract connections Zheng discovers. Thus his

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<sup>3</sup> Sophia Law's essay on *Being in Traditional Chinese Landscape Painting* elaborates on the Daoist tenet of *Being* in traditional Chinese landscapes and how the notions are similar to Martin Heidegger's philosophy of Being.

artworks tend to resemble the fluid ecologies and multifaceted realities of nature's micro and macro systems. Forms in Zheng's artworks may recall the macrocosms of the universe or the microsynaptic roots in our neurosystem or even the branches of an ancient tree root. The complexity of these structural systems represent the seemingly spontaneous amorphous yet orderly fashion in which nature flourishes, the duality between chaos and order. The similarity in formation proves that there is an unbound fluid connection between all organisms and objects, a force that touches upon and influences everything around us. This ecological view, compatible with Daoist thought and quantum mechanics, links neatly with the innate material qualities expressed through ink and paper: two materials which Zheng laboriously deconstructs in his paintings and installations. Peeling back the layers in Zheng's practice reveals the elaborately intertwined postulations behind the simple and sublime abstract forms of his artworks.

On any given day at Zheng's studio, *xuan*<sup>4</sup> papers and ink brushes are scattered around the space alongside compositions with calligraphic exercises and ink paintings in various stages of completion. His computer monitor blinks with segmented footage he has taken on his phone while exploring a particularly remote area of the woods and complex diagrams demonstrating the physics behind the fabrication of his latest installation are neatly pinned on the walls. Although Zheng has recently been developing multimedia installations, his pieces continue to trace back to the premise he explores in painting: mainly, the question of how he can morph the ethereal existence of traditional Chinese ink to form his own contemporary language. As such, Zheng's time in the studio

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<sup>4</sup> With origins from ancient China, *xuan* paper is made from inner bark of the mulberry tree and is widely used for practicing Chinese calligraphy and ink painting

is frequently devoted to the pursuit of painting. For Zheng, painting is a practice of meditation and preparation. Consequently, accessing the complexities of Zheng's methodology is dependent on an understanding of the history and culture of Chinese ink painting and especially aspects bound to Daoist philosophy. Zheng's explorations of and expansions into new media and knowledge bases continue to inform his painting practice, and, vice versa, an exchange of possibilities flowing from one medium to another.

By collecting knowledge from the world around him, Zheng continues to search for avenues to visualize perceived realities in refined and simple ways, bringing out the beauty in the banal or the spectacular in the ignored. Zheng carved his own distinctive visual philosophy within the spiritual framings of traditional Chinese ink painting and through conceptual overlaps between Eastern and Western ontological disciplines. Composed of innumerable dualities—the juxtaposition of organic ink and plastic acrylic, the dance between black and white tones, the energetic spirit of the sublime—Zheng's artworks exhibit the universal push and pull between chaos and order. A refined style of kinetic elegance, the flows in his pieces represent the flux and shifts of the cosmos. Zheng develops his unmistakable aesthetic signature by extracting principles from traditional Chinese ink paintings and the California Light and Space movement. As his practice grew to include ambitious installation projects, so does the complexity of the notions behind his pieces. Nevertheless Zheng's artworks always provide an approachable avenue for sensual appreciation, even if the viewer is unaware of the collection of knowledge behind the conception of the piece. Requiring physical and cognitive participation from the viewer, Zheng's artworks are immersive, activating the consciousness through stimulating the physical bodily receptors of his audiences.

Rising in recognition, Zheng has works in major museum collections, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, and the M+ Museum in Hong Kong as well as shows at many more museums and galleries around the globe. While a body of literature on Zheng's practice exists, mainly written by art historians with a specialty in contemporary Chinese art,<sup>5</sup> much of it is largely concerned with establishing his position as a revolutionary artist revitalizing and transforming the Chinese ink painting tradition. Interpretative essays and critical writings about Zheng's artwork most often attempt to fit them within the Chinese artistic canon or are surface aesthetic comparisons to Western post-war artists. However, little to no scholarly research has addressed Zheng's inclination towards transdisciplinary and transhistorical schools of thought and how those ideas are integrated into his methodology. Through mostly primary sources and interviews with Zheng, this thesis follows the evolution of his visual philosophy by tracing the threads of Zheng's influences and dissecting how those influences sculpted his artistic endeavors. The research reveals rich philosophical constructs behind Zheng's practice, opening up pathways for new approaches to Zheng's artworks. Ultimately, this thesis questions the narrow categorization of Zheng's practice as definitively Chinese contemporary art, and instead facilitates the understanding that his artworks demonstrate a convergence of multiple artistic hereditary lines and global discourses.

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<sup>5</sup> Independent curator and professor Britta Erickson has written and produced much of the scholarship available on Zheng Chongbin's practice.

## PAINTINGS: SEEPAGE OF HISTORIES

“Beauty is one way in which truth essentially occurs as unconcealedness.”  
- Martin Heidegger

Zheng Chongbin’s painting *Turbulence* (2014) stands at more than 10 feet tall and almost 6 feet wide. The piece has proportions akin to a traditional Chinese hanging scroll, although its enormous size is also reminiscent of an American Abstract Expressionist painting. Composed of various monochromatic hues of black, gray, and white, the piece consists of four simple ingredients: Chinese ink, water, acrylic, and *xuan* paper. The mix of brilliant white acrylic with dark black ink forms soft textured grays that alternate between matte and reflective, spreading outwards like cool, yet fiery flames. Three large, dark, calligraphic strokes dominate the center of the painting, resembling the Chinese character three. The movement depicted between the acrylic and ink is a delicate dance, with each component pushing, pulling, and fusing. The acrylic, at moments in the composition, literally pushes up out of the *xuan* paper canvas, extenuated by its shine, while the matte ink recedes and is absorbed to become one with the paper. The topographic quality created by this undulating effect liken the composition to an aerial photograph of burning rivers or cracked, icy tundras. Chance encounters between the ink and acrylic and the interplay of the two pigments activate ephemerality and dynamism, a bold attempt at an illustration of the cosmos.

Zheng’s manner of painting is spontaneous. He often works on multiple paintings at once, pollinating one painting with the ideas of another. When painting across multiple *xuan* papers, Zheng often purposely misaligns the sheets, with one piece overlapping with

another. At times there might be a thoughtfully placed wooden stick preventing the ink from spreading to another region of the paper or Zheng will apply diluted white acrylic with a squeegee, or decide to mix it directly with ink wash. He may continuously brush the paper with a thick *paibi*,<sup>6</sup> adding ink on top of the acrylic, which seeps into crevices and untouched spaces of the paper. Composed of layered textured strokes and ink washes, the paintings vibrate with tension and movement. Alternatively he may leave vast regions of the *xuan* paper empty of pigment. At times he will employ water to further push the materials, the paper, acrylic, and ink, to perform. He then lets the pieces dry, proceeding to direct the movements of the materials for a couple more days, but eventually smooths everything out to be mounted on a hard surface.

A soulful search for harmony between the materials and a reverberation of both the past and the present, the ethereal monochrome paintings characteristic of Zheng's artworks incorporate the dualistic blend of both Western and Chinese ideas and art forms, one culture seeping into another. The primordial energy emanating from the ink markings of traditional Chinese landscape paintings are abstracted in Zheng's paintings. The black ink vibrant and dynamic across the paper. Classical Chinese painters usually employ natural landscapes as representation of the mindscape. Mountains and streams stand in for human emotions, feelings, perception, and realities. For Zheng, nonrepresentational forms provide greater possibilities of manifesting these energies. Along with this abstraction is an assertive, almost aggressive force in his artworks that is not found in classical Chinese ink paintings. This strong energy is a by-product of Modern American

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<sup>6</sup> *Paibi* is a brush used in Chinese painting and is often the preferred tool for mounting, rather than actual painting. The brush consists of thick coarse hairs and has a flat head.

influences, such as Richard Serra<sup>7</sup> (b.1938) and Ad Reinhardt (1913-67). This convergence and flow of histories is engendered in part by Zheng's desire to elucidate to the contemporary world the universality of ink's spirit and ethos.

To fully understand Zheng's oeuvre and the genesis of his more recent multimedia installation pieces, it is important to acknowledge the significance of ink painting for Zheng's practice. A method Zheng continuously develops and evolves, ink painting is the nucleus of Zheng's process. Chinese history and culture, ingrained in the spirit of ink, are fundamental components that make up the foundational skeleton for Zheng's visual philosophy. Ink painting, one of the oldest artistic and cultural traditions in China, is a meditative skill entrenched in the history of the country, tied directly to philosophical, ethical, political, and religious belief systems. Lesley Ma, a curator specializing in Chinese paintings states of the ink painting practice, "many artists consider it the foundational basis of Asian art and visual culture. An idea frequently returned to is the process of transformation embodied in the Daoist tenet of 'Stillness in Movement, Movement in Stillness'."<sup>8</sup> Functioning as a vehicle to memorialize Chinese culture, ink can also be said to be the embodiment of Daoism,<sup>9</sup> the ancient philosophy

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<sup>7</sup> In 2009, Alexandra Monroe curated the show "The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1890-1989." The exhibition explored how American artists were influenced by Asian art and culture, especially by Eastern philosophy and spirituality. Ad Reinhardt and Robert Irwin were artists included in the show. This volley of dialogue between Eastern and Western artists come full circle with Zheng.

<sup>8</sup> Lesley Ma, "The Weight of Lightness: Ink Art at M+: Curatorial Statement," West Kowloon Cultural District, M+ Museum, Accessed October 29, 2020, <https://www.westkowloon.hk/en/inkart/curatorial-statement-1996>.

<sup>9</sup> Daoism is a philosophy and religion that began in China. Many Chinese traditions, medicinal foundations, mysticism, and cultural practices stem from or incorporate some aspect of Daoist teachings.



that captures and expresses the spirit of the Chinese. According to Chinese ink artist Zhang Yu (b.1959), a contemporary of Zheng's, "the most important thing is the ink and wash spirit! This spirit is peculiar to us Chinese."<sup>10</sup> There is an inherent historical connection between ink and Daoism as ink has been used to express Daoist doctrines in writing and art since the inception of the ancient philosophy. Even the make-up and fluid nature of ink seems to adhere to Daoist principles. Ink, made from crushed carbon components sourced directly from the earth, when encountering the fibrous surface of *xuan* paper, has an intrinsic inclination to simulate the shapes of transcendent mountains, rivers, and trees, the very forms that are often used to depict Daoist stories and tenets in classic Chinese paintings. The combination of ink and *xuan* paper has shared formal ancestry and structural semblance with other carbon composed components, from the neural and vascular systems of the human body to river streams and plant roots and veins. Even the blackness of ink and whiteness of the *xuan* paper can be seen as symbolic of the dualistic *qi* forces of the Yin and Yang. For Zheng, ink, like Daoism, is a historic material fully saturated with Chinese past and present culture, bound by the weight of tradition. As Zheng states, "my choice of ink alone is because ink has obvious and unique cultural properties pertaining to identity and historical memory."<sup>11</sup>

The customary ways the ancient material of ink has been used to activate the abyss of the mind continues to be at the foundation of Zheng's methodology. The power of the line, the mark created by ink and brush is traditionally thought of as symbolic of

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<sup>10</sup> Maxwell K. Hearn, "Ink Art: An Introduction," in *Ink Art* (Florence: Conti Tipocolor, 2013), 14.

<sup>11</sup> Zheng Chongbin, "My Reading of Shitao's Remarks on Painting," in *Zheng Chongbin: Impulse, Matter, Form* (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2014), 76.

the birth of reality. The marking of ink is believed to come directly from the mind, enacting the inner consciousness of the artist. The seventeenth-century monk painter Shitao states in his *Remarks on Painting*, “[The Primordial Mark] is fundamental to depicting everything in existence, and is the root of all images. It is perceptible spiritually yet works mysteriously in the human mind...when one line is laid down, a multitude of lines follows. When one principle presently forms, a host of principles clings to it. Discerning the path of the Primordial [Mark], one will reach the limit of reason.”<sup>12</sup> Zheng interprets this statement by Shitao in relation to his own work: “The Prime Brushstroke is this type of art; by relying on one’s own methods to understand reality, one attains the realm of humanity. That is a modern annotation of the Prime Brushstroke, wherein humanity influences each person to find his or her own extent.”<sup>13</sup> The emergence of Zheng’s style of painting can be traced through his contemporary expositions of historical Chinese painting tenants, such as the ones written by Shitao. As Zheng states, “of course, an artist’s identity is generated from the past; the past is always connected to everyday life.”<sup>14</sup> He uses that history, which forms the very DNA of his practice, to question the boundaries of ink painting. For instance, Zheng pays homage to his roots in his series *Six Cannons* (2012). Based on Zheng’s re-interpretation of sixth century Chinese art historian Xie He’s *Six Principles of Chinese Painting*, the pieces are modeled after the artist’s contemporization of the ink painting process, transforming and reordering the principles

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<sup>12</sup> Shitao, *Enlightening Remarks on Painting*, trans. and with an introduction by Richard E. Strassberg (Pasadena, CA: Pacific Asia Museum, 1989), 61.

<sup>13</sup> Zheng, “My Reading of Shitao’s *Remarks on Painting*,” 75.

<sup>14</sup> Lisa Claypool, “Architectonic Ink: Zheng Chongbin in Conversation with Lisa Claypool,” *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, vol. 10, no. 4 (July/August 2011): 43.

to resonate with Zheng's own perceptions and way of looking. Each vertical panel of *Six Cannons* illustrate new ideologies: Resonance and Perception, Perception of Material and Image, Perception of Structure and Space, Action and Interaction, Acquisition and Transformation, and Medium and Formation. Composed of the mediums characteristic to Zheng's paintings, ink, acrylic, and paper, *Six Cannons* can be seen as a visual essay in which Zheng defines his artistic process.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps the most useful comparison of Zheng's visual philosophy to traditional Chinese ink practices is their analogous search for the moment of enlightenment, of revelation towards certain realities. Zheng's paintings may not reflect the same reality as one that was present hundreds of years ago, but there is a string that attaches us to it, a distant echo that reverberates, a reminiscent sound of the past.

The beginning of Zheng's trajectory of interest in pushing the practice of Chinese ink painting can be traced to his first solo show at the Shanghai Art Museum in 1988. A spectacularly atypical showing for China at the time, especially as the nation was just emerging from the tight reins of the Communist regime, the exhibition focused on his body of works, *Another State of Man*. Large, vertical studies of abstracted figures in black ink hung closely together, an army of disfigured limbs and torsos twisting at odd angles. Zheng presented a different perspective of the human body and its movement, inspired by observations of how his disabled sister was able to navigate the world in her own exceptional way. This departure from classical ink subjects, even before his arrival

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<sup>15</sup> In an essay titled *A Reordering of Xie He's Six Laws*, Zheng explains his reinterpretation of Xie He's laws. In fact, Zheng has written a number of essays contemporizing the theories and philosophies of renown Chinese painters and art historians, including his reinterpretation of Shitao's *Remarks on Painting*.

to the United States, demonstrates that early on Zheng already had a desire to push beyond what he studied in art school and to explore other avenues for ink painting. It was not until he began his fellowship at the San Francisco Art Institute that Zheng seriously turn to studies of Western art and discovered numerous throughlines between both Western and Eastern schools of thought. Those throughlines became the groundwork for Zheng's ever-expanding visual vocabulary of ink.

Although Zheng extensively critiqued the methods and philosophies underlying classical Chinese ink painting, he still felt confining himself to investigations of Chinese painting was limiting. Zheng was eager to expand his artistic language beyond ink to better address a contemporary audience and to fit his own philosophical ideas about the boundless, universal spirit found within ink itself. Zheng's methodology burgeoned when he began to excavate the principles behind Western art ideals, histories, and philosophies. He found analogous moments with these seemingly dissimilar fields of thought which strengthened the expression of the spirit of ink. This interest in the study of the seepage between cultures not only stems from Zheng's personal experience within two cultural spheres, but is also heavily influenced by the writings of contemporary French philosopher François Jullien. Jullien's dissection of Chinese philosophical ontology through a Western lens was particularly compelling for Zheng. The foundation of Jullien's philosophy, the examination of divergences rather than the differences between cultures, is neatly summarized in a passage from *Silent Transformations*:

divergence promotes a point of view which is no longer that of identification, in favor of what I will call exploration: it envisages the extent to which various possibilities could be deployed and what

intersections are discernible in thought. At the same time, it brings to the fore the preliminary question that has not been developed within philosophy itself, which is, to what extent in China or Greece, on one front or another, dealing with them in one way or another, can the frontiers of what is thinkable be discerned and, more than this, can an inkling of what one has not thought to think be ventured?<sup>16</sup>

This basis of thought greatly appealed to Zheng as he sculpted his own artistic philosophy and material practice. Zheng continuously refers back to Jullien's doctrine of exploring divergences as he experiments with and molds new avenues for ink to reveal truths found in both Western and Eastern art histories.

Often looking at works and writings of art historians and artists of a generation before him, Zheng voraciously digested texts by American artists, most notably Ad Reinhardt, Richard Serra, and Robert Smithson (1938-1973).<sup>17</sup> To compare Zheng's artworks formally to these artists would, in some cases, reveal aesthetic likeness. While important, these surface resemblances are merely coincidental yields of Zheng's incorporation of parts of their artistic philosophy he found inspiring and which fit within his developing practice. Zheng unearthed similarities between artistic perceptual practices separated by immense distances of culture and time. For instance, while looking at French 19th century Edward Degas's ballerina series, Zheng noticed the paintings were

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<sup>16</sup> François Jullien, *Silent Transformations* (Salt Lake City, UT: Seagull Books, 2011), 26.

<sup>17</sup> Coincidentally, most Western artists who Zheng indicated were influential to his practice also began their career as painters and moved on to be recognized for their artworks made from other materials.

composed from the corner looking out to the scene. He realized Degas presented a perspective similar to that of traditional Chinese Song painter Ma Yuan, who was most notably known for his “one-corner” compositions. These discoveries of similarities between the most dissimilar artistic practices and philosophies throughout art histories are the most fascinating to Zheng and he extracts these flows of ideas and utilizes them in his own artistic process.

Zheng was particularly drawn to Richard Serra’s focus on how materials can be used to challenge the viewer’s perception of their own bodies in relation to the surrounding environment. An example of a series Zheng studied is Serra’s paintstick drawings. The drawings began as studies for his sculptural works which Serra later decided to develop into independent artworks. The drawings offer insight into Serra’s fascination with a material’s innate forms, forms that materialize when allowing the object to dictate its own transformation. Serra’s *Solid* (2008) series, explores the paintstick’s natural tendency to aggregate into thick layers, forming a dense texture similar to tar. Serra allows the paintstick to accumulate at will, methodically pouring the melted pigment, only ever seeing the outcome after lifting the paper from the screen that facilitates the layering. This freedom and lack of forced direction by the artist is, according to Zheng’s interpretation of Chinese Qing dynasty master painter Shitao’s writings, also a fundamental principle of Chinese ink painting. Shitao dictates that the spirit of the ink and brush must be part of the generative factor in painting. As Zheng states:

Shitao “emerging from the womb” is no less than the self of the artist arising from the generative unity of brush and ink. This very contemporary

concept reminds me of the work of Richard Serra, which by his own account emerges out of his working process as applied to his choice of material.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, Serra's *Solid* series also has a monochromatic, aesthetic quality that can be found in Zheng's paintings. In *Terrain* (2014), Zheng meticulously layers coats of black ink on *xuan* paper. The ink spontaneously fills and flows through the crevices of the fibrous paper, causing it to contort and contract as it dries. Regions of thick ink glint in the light, emitting a brilliant shine while the shadows of the ridges formed by the aggregation of ink and buckling of paper form the darkest areas of the composition. Comparing Serra's *Solid* #27 and Zheng's *Terrain*, both artworks have viscous characteristics, oscillating between sculptural and painterly. There is a purity in the pieces produced by the rigorous, focused study of the make-up of a certain material. In Serra's and Zheng's artworks, the artist's hand is not erased, but is barely present, guiding the flow and expression of the material itself. These compositions arose from each artist's desire to study the nature of the materials they work with; coincidentally, both artists also used these pieces as a foundation to investigate ideas and concepts to execute other seminal artworks.

*Turbulence*, the painting described at the beginning of the chapter, is a prime example of Zheng's style at its maturation, when he truly began to cement his new painting process. Zheng took the first step in pushing the boundaries of ink by mixing the medium with white acrylic, a plastic paint invented in the United States during the first

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<sup>18</sup> Zheng, "My Reading of Shitao's Remarks on Painting," 79.

half of the 20th century. Zheng stated, “initially when I picked up the acrylic, I was thinking about it from the material point of view. I felt the painting physically did not have enough impact, and I wanted to add more textures as well as other layers beyond pure water and ink wash. My idea was to add one more element and then see what happens—explore the possibilities.”<sup>19</sup> In fact, Zheng experimented extensively, attempting to find a visual language that could advance his own cerebral conceptions of the possibilities of the ink spirit. At one point Zheng added color to his paintings, a technique which he quickly abandoned. He even left a painting in the rain to let nature take its course, but the *xuan* paper completely dissolved. It was the mixture of white acrylic and ink Zheng found to be the most successful. In Zheng’s paintings, the dualistic forces of yin and yang are echoed by the push and pull between ink and acrylic and their simultaneous compatibility and playfulness. When mixed with acrylic, ink is given a new form, a thick texture and sheen only possible from the synthetic elements of acrylic. Zheng elaborates, “my use of acrylic is basically intended to enrich ink painting by adding abstract plastic elements, so as to create a multi-dimensional environment, to increase the tangibility and tactility of the medium and compensate for the limited means that ink paintings rely on. I found that by incorporating acrylic into ink painting, I cleared away barriers to expression: it completed my visual language.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Britta Erickson, "Innovations in Space: Ink Paintings by Zheng Chongbin," in *Chongbin Zheng: Ink Painting* (Shanghai, China, 2007), 29.

<sup>20</sup> Kenneth Wayne, “Zheng and Abstract Expressionism,” in *Zheng Chongbin: Impulse, Matter, and Form* (Beijing: Ink Studio, 2014), 21.



Another way in which Zheng breaks out of the traditional ink painting practice is through his use of the *paibi* brush. Traditionally, the *maobi*<sup>21</sup> is the brush of choice for ink painters, yet Zheng favors *paibi*, which is most often used for paper mounting. The *paibi* is made of thick, coarse fibers that allow for greater and more even coverage of an area. When explaining the reasoning behind the use of the *paibi*, Zheng states: “My first experiment was to use the *paibi*, a wide brush used for mounting paintings. I found that it changed my gestural behavior. It changed how I approach my work in terms of structure rather than through formulated cohesive brush movements.”<sup>22</sup> For Zheng, the brush and ink are symbiotic entities. This he gets from his reading of Shitao’s *Huayu Lu* (“Enlightening Remarks on Painting”): “The brush applies the ink with its dynamic spirit . . . the brush becomes spirited only if infused with the energy of life.”<sup>23</sup> Zheng uses the *paibi* to bring forth the spirit of the ink, unhindered by an artist’s defined movements. The *paibi* facilitates sweeping, dynamic strokes to transfer the ink from the painter’s hand. The ink, because of the *paibi*’s broad and imprecise mark-making, is given the opportunity to move according to its own volition, alive and imbuing the paper with vital energy. In this way, Zheng’s presence is erased, the artist’s ego effectively minimized. Instead Zheng hopes to create a path in which he could present multiple realities and truths unique to each viewer’s own perception. Scholar Craig Yee summarizes this:

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<sup>21</sup> *Maobi* is usually the preferred instrument for Chinese ink painting as it gives the wielder the ability to produce fine lines and have greater control of the ink. The *maobi* has softer and more flexible bristles than the *paibi*.

<sup>22</sup> Craig Yee, “Zheng Chongbin: The Classical Origins of Contemporary Abstraction,” in *Randian Magazine*, July 20, 2017, [http://www.randian-online.com/np\\_blog/the-classical-origins-of-contemporary-abstraction](http://www.randian-online.com/np_blog/the-classical-origins-of-contemporary-abstraction).

<sup>23</sup> Zheng, “My Reading of Shitao’s Remarks on Painting,” 79.

Zheng Chongbin argues that because of the autographic nature of calligraphy, the traditional artist's identity and ego are inseparable from his brushwork. Among other things, this prevents the artist from escaping his ego-bounded perspective and attaining, in his artwork, universal resonance. Although the viewer may identify with the mind or feelings of the artist through the artist's brushwork, she or he may be prevented from experiencing a reality greater than that of the artist because of this. Zheng describes this as a kind of "hollowed individualism," or "empty expressionism."<sup>24</sup>

Classical Chinese ink paintings, since the Northern Song Dynasty, have contained the principles that underlie Western abstraction.<sup>25</sup> For instance, in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese landscape paintings were not exact replicas of views Chinese painters saw before their eyes, but idealized compositions of which figurative components represent certain ideals and principles of Confucianism, Daoism, or even historical periods and folklore. There was no attempt at configuring exact physical likeness and at the height of Chinese classical painting, only those who could paint in a way that allowed room for individualized interpretation were considered masters of the craft.<sup>26</sup> As Sophia Law,

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<sup>24</sup> Yee, "Zheng Chongbin: The Classical Origins of Contemporary Abstraction."

<sup>25</sup> In Western art terms, abstraction is a break from representational qualities.

<sup>26</sup> While realistic depictions of subjects were important, by the 11<sup>th</sup> century, emphasis on capturing the spirit of the subject increasingly became the ultimate criteria of excellence in painting. An example of this can be seen in *The Queen Mother of the West Flying on a Crane* (dated 1500–1552 by the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco) by Ming Dynasty painter Qiu Ying. In the fan painting, Qiu Ying includes a delicate phoenix, but instead of providing intricate details of the mythical bird, there is only a suggestion of the figure, leaving the viewer to fill in the details with their own imagination.

Professor of Visual Studies explains, Chinese landscape paintings have “an emphasis on a conceptual rather than visual manifestation of nature, ancient *shanshui* aims to convey an experience of ‘being in nature’ rather than ‘seeing nature’. This being in nature is not about any singular experience of when and where man encounters nature, but a perpetual truth experienced by man in/with nature, namely, the wholeness and universality of the cosmic, laws and cycles in nature, and the integrative harmony between man and things.”<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, Western representational artworks are ideally mimetic, while Chinese representational codes produce a legible form, while leaving space for the viewer to complete the image within their own minds. Zheng builds on this traditional Chinese principle of representation and takes it further by completely abstracting his compositions. Finding parallels in artwork by American Abstract painters such as Ad Reinhardt, Zheng removed all hints of figuration in favor of producing pieces that lift the essence of what the figurative represents in classical ink paintings. Through abstraction, Zheng leaves room for interpretation, directing his audience on a path to discover their own interpretation of the ink spirit. When comparing Ad Reinhardt’s and Shitao’s painting philosophy, Zheng states, “Ad Reinhardt and Shitao appear to be far removed in time and place. However, both men were in a dialogue with their times and the art-making process, and embraced ideas of pure art, as well as the nonrealist, nonrepresentational, nonfigurative, nonimagistic, and non-Abstract Expressionist.”<sup>28</sup> For

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<sup>27</sup> Sophia Law, “Being in Traditional Chinese Landscape Painting,” in *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 32, no. 4 (July 29, 2011): 378, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2011.584615>.

<sup>28</sup> Zheng, “My Reading of Shitao’s Remarks on Painting,” 77.

Zheng, non-representational or non-objective is the ultimate form to symbolize the untouched spirit of ink.

Zheng also challenges the traditional function of *xuan* paper in ink paintings. First, he rarely leaves any blank space in his compositions. In classical Chinese paintings, artists often leave parts of the composition empty, allowing the natural paper to breathe. This empty space is meant to convey a comfortable void that echoes the vastness of the human mind and the universe. The blankness prompting *woyou*, or mind wandering, the important idea of spiritual meditation through the viewing of landscape paintings. Yet Zheng interprets this void in an entirely different manner. Instead he focuses on how his paintings could draw the viewer in through the vibrant energy created by the tension between ink and acrylic. He explores a different approach to representing the great expanse of the mind by filling the composition with abundance and chaos. Again Zheng finds links between the classical teachings of Shitao and the contemporary Western painter Ad Reinhardt, especially in their aesthetics and approach to the color black. Both believe in representing the primordial void (of the mind and of the universe) through blackness: Reinhardt through the immensely thick black of oil paints, and Shitao through the matte blackness of ink.<sup>29</sup> Zheng's encounter of pieces by Reinhardt provided, if anything, affirmation that the expression of the void can be represented by darkness and

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<sup>29</sup> Reinhardt actually indicated that his Black painting series was influenced by Chinese paintings and represents a new way of seeing. In fact, Reinhardt's Black paintings also resist easy interpretation and like traditional Chinese ink pieces, require meditative looking. From gallery label in 2008 exhibition *Focus: Ad Reinhardt and Mark Rothko* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York/Elizabeth Reede, "Ad Reinhardt, *Abstract Painting*, 1963," the Museum of Modern Art, accessed October 29, 2020. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78976>.

chaos. Zheng also activates the *xuan* paper as an expressive agent, rather than a passive surface. He often folds or collages the paper, encouraging the ink to accentuate the formations of its natural fibers. Zheng states about the function of the paper in his painting process:

I am also always interested in the seam that is created by putting two pieces of paper together—in substructures beneath the painting’s composition. I lay pieces of paper together and paint; when I mount it I shift them to overlap. In fact I should go back to explain that process. The paper shifting doesn’t come after I have painted; it starts at the beginning. I like to look at the shifted space before I put any ink on the paper; I am looking at the hidden structure of two geometries.<sup>30</sup>

Zheng’s composition rejects the flatness of classical Chinese ink painting. He coaxes the ink to a sculptural form through several different methods in his painting process. Through methodical layering of ink, incorporation of other elements such as paper, acrylic and aluminum, as well as geometric optical illusions, Zheng encourages ink to push out beyond two dimensions. For instance, his piece *Unfolding Landscape* (2015) resembles both a traditional Chinese landscape folding screen and markings on the earth of tectonic shifts etched by time. Although the painting is actually flat, Zheng employs geometric illusions through misalignment of the paper and hard edges of ink to produce the sense that the painting is receding and protruding. Zheng also began mounting his finished

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<sup>30</sup> Claypool, “Architectonic Ink: Zheng Chongbin in Conversation with Lisa Claypool,” 50.

compositions on aluminum panels, as seen in *Unfolding Landscape*, to enhance the luminescent quality of his paintings. The metal subtly reflects light through pockets of the thin *xuan* paper, contributing to the illusion of space within the painting. Traditional Chinese ink paintings are usually a cerebral, spiritual experience facilitated by simple forms, but Zheng expands the experience to the physical space, both literally and figuratively. He does this by pushing ink from two to three dimensions, and later from painting to installation. By creating something tangible as well as mental, Zheng produces a full body, immersive experience for the viewer.

There is a quality of music and dance, a *qiyun* in Zheng's artworks. In an interview with critic and curator Craig Yee, Zheng explained his artworks are "a contemporary enactment of *qiyun*."<sup>31</sup> The concept of *qiyun* was first defined by 6<sup>th</sup> century art historian and critic Xie He in his "Six Laws of Painting" found in the book *The Record of the Classification of Old Painters*.<sup>32</sup> Although there are a few varying translations of the term, art historian James Cahill defines Xie He's *qiyun* as "a sense of movement from spirit consonance,"<sup>33</sup> meaning the perceived energy of the work by the viewer as transcribed by the artist, or the overall essence of the artwork. The element of *qiyun*, according to Xie He, is believed to be essential, the most consequential factor for traditional Chinese ink painting. Zheng incorporates that first law in his paintings through his own interpretation,

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<sup>31</sup> Yee, "Zheng Chongbin: The Classical Origins of Contemporary Abstraction."

<sup>32</sup> *The Record of the Classification of Old Painters* was written circa 550 by Xie He.

<sup>33</sup> Cahill, James cit. in Robert L. Thorp and Richard Ellis Vinograd, *Chinese Art and Culture* (Upper Saddle, River, NJ: Pearson, 2006), 177.

redefining *qiyun* as “vital resonance in engendering movement,”<sup>34</sup> the crux of it based on the artist’s realization of experience and perception of the audience.

Zheng found ties between the ancient Chinese notion of *qiyun* and the comparatively contemporary Western philosophy of phenomenology, as both are concerned with perception through the experience of self and being.<sup>35</sup> In an interpretive essay of Xie He’s Six Laws, Zheng states, “I wish to transform phenomenology into a study of resonance (*qiyun*), one that can serve as an apt contemporary explanation of resonance.”<sup>36</sup>

Steeped in the histories and resonances of Daoism, Zheng’s paintings exude tranquility in the distilled chaos of black, white, and grays. The ink mimics the flow of the mind, the flow of energy in all Beings, the flow of the cosmos. Zheng’s paintings have a quiet contemplative quality of movement present in traditional Chinese ink paintings, yet there is an assertive force behind his artworks. His paintings explore possibilities of the materials he works with, pushing the boundaries of traditional usage to produce his unique artistic vocabulary. Extracting knowledge that reinforce his own artistic philosophy, his insatiable consumption of a variety of philosophies and practices reaffirms the very truth and spirit Zheng finds in the make-up of ink. Zheng began, as

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<sup>34</sup> Zheng Chongbin, “A Reordering of Xie He’s Six Laws,” in *Zheng Chongbin: Impulse, Matter, Form* (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2014), 84.

<sup>35</sup> Phenomenology, the study of experience and consciousness based on the perceived self, can be thought of as the reasoning behind *qiyun*. The philosophy is one avenue of explaining how the viewer is experiencing the *qiyun* of an artwork. According to Zheng, a detailed exposition of this concept can be found in Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*.

<sup>36</sup> Zheng, “A Reordering of Xie He’s Six Laws,” 84. The dissection of the crossovers between phenomenology and *qiyun* will be discussed more in depth in the next chapter.

twentieth century German philosopher and founder of phenomenology Edmund Husserl, referred to as the “phenomenological reduction,”<sup>37</sup> of ink. Zheng took a very scientific and systematic approach to dismantling the genetic, cultural, historical, and spiritual composition of ink, tracing it, pushing it, evolving it into a contemporary form that lives outside of its material shell. As Zheng became increasingly familiar with and knowledgeable about the properties of ink, he began to explore the possibility of translating and extending the essence of ink to other mediums. Choosing to break out of the static, two dimensionality of painting, his practice branched out to synthetic materials, ranging from video, screens, plastic meshing, fiberglass, steel beams and more. However, Zheng never strays far from painting, using that part of his practice as theoretical and aesthetic foundation for his installation works.

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<sup>37</sup> According to Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), phenomenological reduction is when past perception and cultural consciousness of objects are stripped or dismantled to reveal their primordial truth.



## TRANSITIONS: REORIENTING THE MIND

“Ultimately, the great power of art lies, in part, in its ability to become the mental map that allows us to reach beyond what we can see.”

- Zheng Chongbin

Yards of long fibrous *xuan* paper brushed with layers of jet-black ink mounted on angled industrial steel plates, *Wall of Skies* (2015) emits an eerily calm glow in the darkened room. The concrete floor, polished to a reflective shine, evokes the image of a silvery moon-lit body of water, a nod to the Huangpu river paces away from the gallery. As the viewer walks across the spacious room, there is an unmistakable vitality in the *qiyun* of the artwork. The painting comes alive, the veins of ink undulate onto the floor, snaking towards the viewer. Zheng Chongbin’s *Wall of Skies* is a monumental painting installation featured in the 2016-2017 Shanghai Biennale at the Power Station of Art. The painting comes alive as the carefully placed lights, the reflective floor and angled painted plates engender the illusion the ink has spilled beyond the “canvas,” breaking the traditional two dimensional barrier and permeating into the viewer’s space. The effect of *Wall of Skies* is not merely visual and is a fully embodied experience, dependent on the shifting spatial relationship of the viewer to the artwork. As the viewer walks around the room, the reflection of the painting on the floor shimmers. *Wall of Skies* can cause a dizzying sensation, challenging the viewer to question their perception of the space, with no clear horizon line or vanishing point to anchor them.

Although the materials and aesthetics of *Wall of Skies* hearken back to Zheng’s paintings, the artwork represents one of Zheng’s first forays into impelling his investigations of ink beyond the two dimensions of paper. *Wall of Skies* is one of Zheng’s

earliest experimental pieces in which he explored optical possibilities of materials through reflection, refraction, and the play of synthetic and natural light within a restrained space. *Wall of Skies* embraced elements of light and how they can be manipulated to alter the viewer's perception of the space in which the artwork occupies. Zheng considers the cause and effect of the consequences of movement according to the viewer's position to the artwork and its reflection. The reflection of ink flowing along the floor alters, rippling and changing as the viewer walks around the room. In a 2011 interview with art historian Tony Godfrey, Zheng stated, "I want my paintings seen within architecture and within [an] installation [format]. I want a marriage between installation and paintings. I want a way to look away from painting's flat surface, I want painting that is connected to the physical space."<sup>38</sup> Thus even before Zheng conceived *Wall of Skies*, he already began to consider the relationship between his paintings and its placement within a space. One of Zheng's first site specific pieces, *Wall of Skies* demonstrates a turning point in Zheng's practice when he started to consider the possibilities of presenting perceived realities using light and space. Zheng's artworks became embodiments of concepts and ideas he sought to develop this new approach, quickly growing his visual philosophy to include knowledge outside of his foundational education in Chinese painting methods and histories.

Zheng's visual philosophy consists of a conglomeration of facets of Western and Eastern theories. Finding and collecting throughlines in principles of Martin Heidegger's

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<sup>38</sup> Tony Godfrey, "Zheng Chongbin: Ten Metaphors with which to Experience his Paintings," in *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, vol. 10, no. 4 (July/August 2011), 30.

writings on phenomenology, Timothy Morton's writings on ecology, and Daoist notions, Zheng's investigations converge on the idea of Being and human connections to the greater ecosystem. The ancient Chinese philosophy of Daoism emphasizes harmonious coexistence, fundamental ties between all life forms, and enlightenment through self-realization. These ideas are all foundational aspects of Heidegger's ontological theories based on contextual relationships and Morton's object-oriented dark ecology.<sup>39</sup> The common denominator between these disciplines is the belief that there is a link between all Beings, objects and phenomena, a basic oneness that connects us all. Fritjof Capra, a physicist and founding director of the Center for Ecoliteracy in California, also agrees: "I believe that ecology is the ideal bridge between science and spirituality"<sup>40</sup> and "quantum theory implies an essential interconnectedness of nature."<sup>41</sup> This concept is the ideological thread Zheng has woven through his practice. These disciplines, although far apart, are manifestations of knowledge that combine rational and intuitive faculties, a methodology also reflected in Zheng's practice. After the success of *Wall of Skies*, Zheng extracted the spirit found in his ink paintings, the *qiyun*, and explicated it with other

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<sup>39</sup> Ontology is a field of philosophy that studies the nature of being, existence, and reality. Twentieth century German philosopher Martin Heidegger believed phenomenology is the best method to study ontology. A good reference source for Martin Heidegger's philosophy of phenomenology can be found in Graham Harman's *Heidegger Explained: From Phenomenon to Thing*. Timothy Morton, a professor and philosopher who is heavily influenced by Graham Harman, coined the term dark ecology. Simply put, Morton believes that humanity is in for an existential reckoning which must begin with self realization and awareness of our relationships with large concepts, such as global warming (which he labels hyperobjects) and the environment around us. More information regarding Timothy Morton's philosophy can be found in his book *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, which Zheng Chongbin recommended as a source material for understanding of his practice.

<sup>40</sup> Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics*, 5th ed. (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2010), 9.

<sup>41</sup> Capra, *The Tao of Physics*, 132.

materials. The synthetic agents Zheng comes to favor are especially apt in illuminating his complex, yet ethereal interpretations of Eastern spirituality and Western philosophies.

Zheng began visualizing the ancient primordial ethos found in his ink paintings with materials founded in the modern world. *Branches are Roots in the Sky* (2016) is an example of Zheng's early video pieces. The video consists of spontaneous transitions from skylscapes, to panoramic shots of streaming waterways, to images of ancient tree roots, to anonymous figures, to churning liquid. There are peaceful moments of soft rippling streams and ancient tree barks mixed with moments of crescendoing agitation of running figures and strong currents of water. A synthetic, mechanical soundtrack mixed with natural sounds of water accompanies the thirteen minute video. *Branches are Roots in the Sky* begins and ends with a pan of a beautiful, cloud-filled blue sky. The stacked imagery of the flows of sustenance in *Branches are Roots in the Sky* represent parallel systems as diverse as the microscopic journey of blood cells floating through veins and capillaries or the neural structures in our spine and brain that form our existence, the structures of tree roots, corals, rivers, and lightning. The micro mirroring the macro and the connection of all beings found in the analogous flow of energy inside of humans, inside living things on earth, and throughout the timeless universe. *Branches are Roots in the Sky* is an abstracted interpretation of the ecologist and Daoist view of the interconnectivity of all life.

*Branches are Roots in the Sky* is composed of footage of Zheng's encounters, any phenomena that awakened his experience as a being within the world. The footage was taken with no preconceived plans and later edited together with fragments of synthesized images. The scenes flutter between fictitious and nonfictional, biographical images. For

Zheng, the medium of video is attractive because of its ability to manipulate imagery in a way his paintings could not. The flexibility of the moving image opens up pathways to alternate visual possibilities, such as the inclusion of representational imagery not found in Zheng's paintings. For instance, at the beginning of *Branches are Roots in the Sky*, Zheng layered footage of the vast blue sky with billowing clouds on top of a close up shot of an energetic rippling stream, the transitional slow fade between the two scenes is seamless, illustrating the remarkable formal similarities between the sky and stream. Video has the capacity to blend imagery, evoking the close relationship of humans to nature in an interconnected ecological system. Zheng uses video collage to reveal layers of overlapping realities to expose the underlying structural systems which connect all Beings.

Video also allows Zheng to produce non-linear narratives, bringing together different phenomena and showing the impulses of natural systems to overlap. Unlike the more static mode of painting, the video format affords a temporal fluidity that painting cannot. *Branches are Roots in the Sky* fades into and out of scenes, which repeat and collage on top of another, creating disjunct temporal events that intersect and erase linear time. Drawing inspiration from Robert Smithson's theory of atemporality, general relativity in quantum physics, and Daoist idea of nonlinearity, Zheng distorts and compresses traditional notions of time to bring objects closer together.<sup>42</sup> Through the

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<sup>42</sup> These beliefs all subscribe to nontraditional, non-linear concepts of time. Daoist philosophy observes a compression of time that is the timeless present. A sort of crunching of time, Daoists believe life is threefold and any given moment oscillates between past, present, and future. Capra argues quantum physics's general relativity explains something similar and is a theory which transcends ordinary Western notions of time. Smithson also once wrote in an essay titled *Quasi infinities and the waning of*

video medium, Zheng creates temporal convergences between objects, the audience, and the historical and present environment around us. Professor Mark Van Proyen, in an essay about the influences in Zheng's work stated:

During the past several years, Chongbin has become ever more interested in the writings of Robert Smithson, which among other things, argued toward the erasure of the normal distinctions that we tend to make between human time and geological time—reconfiguring what the word “archeological” might be taken to mean.<sup>43</sup>

Smithson's artworks tend to highlight the noumena of time,<sup>44</sup> a concept François Jullien explains in *Silent Transformations*. For instance, Jullien argues humans are unable to sense the advancement time. We clearly see the effects of the passing of time, the ineluctable sagging of skin or the miraculous sprout of a seed, but we cannot actually see time progressing. Similarly, Heidegger argues there is an “ambiguous way that time is already at work in our environment before we have noticed it at all.”<sup>45</sup> *Branches are Roots in the Sky* generates a conscious awareness of time, the movement and existence of time embodied in the experience of the video. American philosopher Graham Harman's

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*space*: “In art, action is always becoming inertia, but this inertia has no ground to settle on except the mind, which is as empty as actual time.” He believed that certain moments are atemporal, unaffected by the notion of time. Robert Smithson, “Quasi infinities and the waning of space,” in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 34-35.

<sup>43</sup> Mark Van Proyen, “With a Sudden Vigor It Doth Possess: Zheng Chongbin's Recent Paintings and Video Work,” Beijing: Ink Studio, n.d.

<sup>44</sup> Noumena of time refers to François Jullien's statement in *Silent Transformations* about the inability of humans to sense the daily passing of time.

<sup>45</sup> Martin Heidegger as quoted in Graham Harman, *Heidegger Explained: From Phenomenon to Thing* (Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 2007), 27.

summary of Heidegger's construct of truth aptly explains Zheng's philosophy behind *Branches are Roots in the Sky*: "The only way to get at depths of the world is through interpretation, not direct vision. Categorical intuition showed us that there are always concealed layers in any perception, and Heidegger says that time is the ultimate concealed layer of everything. As he puts it, time is the primary transcendental horizon of ontology."<sup>46</sup> The flexibility of video enables Zheng to incorporate aspects of boundaryless temporality, expressing a time that is both past and present in the infinite space of the universe.

There is a deliberately ordered chaos in *Branches are Roots in the Sky*. The images are seemingly randomly looped, a possible reference to Morton's claims about the paradoxical structure of human awareness.<sup>47</sup> The repetition underlines the video's motif of the close relationship of all beings and ecological systems. This sense of ordered chaos is also prevalent in Zheng's paintings, as illustrated by the frenzied tension between the ink and the acrylic balanced by the unity of the composition. At one point in *Branches are Roots in the Sky*, the composition dissolves to a black, churning liquid and the reflection of the viewer slowly appears on screen, a poetic reminder that our experience of being is tied to our own perceptions of self, relative to the world around us. The piece ultimately does not belittle human physicality in the wake of nature's vastness, but rather acknowledges the human presence as a vessel for the understanding of nature's phenomena. A compilation of synthetic mindscapes and natural landscapes, *Branches are*

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<sup>46</sup> Harman, *Heidegger Explained: From Phenomenon to Thing*, 48.

<sup>47</sup> Morton argues in his book *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (2016) that humankind is stuck in a strange loop, which is the crux of the ecological crisis we face today.

*Roots in the Sky* is a meditation on the flow of systems, including time and space, that tie us to the greater cosmos.

There is much crossover between Zheng's visual language, which focuses on self-realization through enlightenment as taught in Daoist philosophy, and the language of the sciences. Both methodologies are nonverbal ways to interpret theories which explore knowledge of how to see and understand the world around us. Capra summarizes the connection between Daoism and the sciences in his book *The Tao of Physics*:

What they do emphasize, however, when they talk about seeing, looking or observing, is the empirical character of their knowledge. This empirical approach of Eastern philosophy is strongly reminiscent of the emphasis on observation in science and thus suggests a framework for our comparison. The experimental stage in scientific research seems to correspond to the direct insight of the Eastern mystic, and the scientific models and theories correspond to the various ways in which this insight is interpreted.<sup>48</sup>

In fact, Heidegger also believed there is a corresponding tie between philosophy and science. He acknowledged philosophies are validated through the sciences, yet argued philosophy can present theories and reach in ways beyond the sciences, opening the realm of thought and notions without the limitations of proofs. These links aid in the understanding of Zheng's affinity towards extracting from these dissimilar disciplines to make up his artistic process. Zheng's artworks are essentially conceived by his desire to discover and introduce new ways of seeing by observing the natural world around him.

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<sup>48</sup> Capra, *The Tao of Physics*, 35.



In 2018, Zheng took his experimentation with space and new mediums further in the installation *Walking Penumbra* (2018). In a dimly lit cavernous room, videos of abstracted liquid forms are projected through varying densities of black mesh, creating a disorienting, unfamiliar environment. A machine-like hum accompanies the videos, violently increasing then fading away at incremental decibels and sharply echoing off the bare concrete walls of the room. The sensory perception of the ebbs and flows of energies established by the images, sounds, and shadows of the piece is dependent on the viewer's optic and auditory system's position within the space. This oscillation produces a hypersensitivity in the viewer, an activated awareness and connection between the viewer and their environment. The sensations in *Walking Penumbra* change constantly in accordance to the movement of the viewer, presenting an infinite combination of calculated visual and auditory chaos. The piece can be seen as an immersive manifestation of Zheng's paintings. The installation of *Walking Penumbra* mirrored Zheng's painting process, requiring the laborious layering of materials to achieve the ideal movement between sound, light and space. When seen as a whole, the composition of *Walking Penumbra* is similar to a reconstruction, in the three dimension, of Zheng's earlier paintings, such as *Unfolding Landscape*. Both artworks are composed of geometric collages of vertical monotoned panels. The arrangement of rectangular mesh panes in *Walking Penumbra* also create varying densities of blacks and grays similar to the layering of ink in Zheng's paintings.

As stated in the press release for the exhibition of *Walking Penumbra*: “Only Zhuangzi<sup>49</sup>, however, makes the *penumbra*—the luminous border between light and shadow—his central image for our existence; it being at once entirely without autonomy or independent existence and yet entirely self-realizing and self—so within its own experiential context.”<sup>50</sup> *Walking Penumbra* is a physical manifestation of the Daoist concept of the void. Parallel and tied to the spatial and temporal composition of the universe, the void is the emptiness and purity of the mind, achieved when realization of the self in relationship to the cosmos is attained. *Walking Penumbra* requires the activation<sup>4</sup> of both the body and the mind, going beyond merely activating optical sensors. The viewer must physically walk through the installation to understand and consume the artwork. *Walking Penumbra* does not allow the viewer to be a casual observer; the installation cannot exist or function without the participation of the audience. In fact, this type of active participation has been used by traditional Chinese ink painters, who understood that representation and communication of enlightenment cannot be obtained by mere observation, only through cerebral participation of both the viewer and the artist. As Zheng states of the concept behind *Walking Penumbra* and the ethos behind his visual philosophy:

Central to my practice is the pre-modern Daoist concept that the natural, inorganic world of energy and matter is living and always changing. If this is the case, how do we attune our perceptions to produce knowledge of

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<sup>49</sup> Zhuangzi is a 4th century BC Chinese philosopher whose writings form the foundation of Daoism.

<sup>50</sup> “Press Release for *Walking Penumbra*,” Beijing: Ink Studio, March 24, 2018.

this ever-changing world? How are we changed by our phenomenological (perceptual) entanglement with the phenomena (events) of the world? In turn, how do we, through our engagement with the world, actively create-transform ourselves and the world's being and becoming?<sup>51</sup>

In fact, both Daoists and quantum physicists believe notions of space and time are based on an individual's perception of self within their own realities. As such, the essential measurements of our human existence can be said to be based on how we engage with the world. A result of Zheng's derivation of thought from Western phenomenology and Chinese philosophy, *Walking Penumbra* attempts to deliver the viewer to a state of awareness, producing an experience of an enlightened self. As art critic and scholar Amjad Majid puts it, "two principles taken from phenomenology that intersect with traditional Chinese philosophy: a) that "consciousness is embodied", and b) "self and world are co-defining and co-enacted."<sup>52</sup> *Walking Penumbra* awakens the consciousness to fully absorb the perceived world, reorienting the senses to its surroundings.

*Walking Penumbra* is also a prime example of Zheng's usage of space and light as the principal materials for his artwork. The blackness of ink is the perfect representation of the dualistic concept of the void, empty of all color. However, in terms of optical physics, black is the absorption of all color wavelengths. Darkness cannot exist without light and light cannot exist without darkness. Yet instead of ink, Zheng chose the

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Amjad Majid, "Ink and the Body: A Phenomenological Approach," Beijing: Ink Studio, September 23, 2014.

synthetic material of mesh to produce the penumbra, the edge between light and dark, referenced in the title. This pivot from an organic to a synthetic material is an illustration of how Zheng is experimenting with ways to contemporize historic, universal notions distilled from the spirit carried through ink. The usage of mesh also allowed Zheng to achieve a more complex dissection of the anatomy of space. In traditional Chinese ink paintings, space was broken down very simply, by three distances: high, deep, and level.<sup>53</sup> This method was used to present dynamic perspectives to allow for optimal wandering of the mind through the physical meandering of the eye through the composition. The mesh in *Walking Penumbra* echoed the technique found in traditional ink painting in the way that it broke up space. The fluidity of the material produced permeable boundaries and soft edges, facilitating wandering and encouraging exploration. However, in moving beyond the two dimensional plane of painting into the three dimensional space, the viewer must navigate *Walking Penumbra* with their entire body and not just their minds.

*Wall of Skies, Branches are Roots in the Sky, and Walking Penumbra* are demonstrations of contemporary meditations of tenets and teachings revealed in traditional Chinese inkscapes. These artworks induce a meditative state of mind in hopes to give rise to a sense of enlightenment. Both physics and Daoism are specialized fields which seek esoteric knowledge and Zheng's elegant and accessible artworks are visual pathways to translating those complex concepts. As Zheng's methodology continues to

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<sup>53</sup> The concept of the three distances was devised by the Song Dynasty artist and scholar Guo Xi (1023–1085) and continues to be used in Chinese ink painting today.

evolve, he illuminates for us the harmony and beauty of bringing together Eastern philosophy and contemporary science in visual form.

## NEW INSTALLATIONS: IMMEASURABLE TRUTH OF SEEING

“Therefore, a work of art is not the reproduction of some particular entity at any given time; it is, on the contrary, the reproduction of the general essence of things, the truth of beings.”

- Martin Heidegger

Driving through Marin County where Zheng Chongbin resides and through Muir Woods where he frequently spends his time hiking, one experiences a delicate serenity generated by the soft, diffuse light that drapes across the headlands. Many of Zheng’s latest multimedia work exudes the same tone, a calmness found in the deepest recesses of the mind. This sublime orientation in Zheng’s artworks is not only a product of his hyper-awareness of his physical surroundings, but from the fusion of Daoist thought with the essence of the mid- to late- 20th century Light and Space movement<sup>54</sup>. Zheng’s fascination with the anatomy of light and space, evident from the multiple ways he engages with the concept, derives from his early academic training in traditional Chinese ink painting. Chinese ink practice emphasizes the use of blank paper to create space and depth. The emptiness of a composition may indicate a vast river or a mountain range in the distance. The practice also engenders sensitivities to light from the employment of monochromatic gradations of ink. Using only the shades between the deep black of pure ink to the light grays of ink wash, artists depict the light of misty mountains or the soft winter snow. Zheng’s subsequent exposure to artworks by Southern California Light and Space artists, especially Robert Irwin, played a crucial role in the development of his

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<sup>54</sup> The Light and Space movement is a loose term that blanketed artists who, inspired by the light in California, used its essence to create ephemeral, minimalist objects and experiences.

installation pieces. Two of Zheng's most recent installations, *Liquid Space* (2019) and *I Look for the Sky?* (2020), signal a turning point in Zheng's practice. Not only are the pieces ambitious in size and concept, but are exemplifications of his inquiries into light, space, nature and materials. Zheng was especially interested in how all the components could come together to enlighten the viewer, to bring to the consciousness an awareness of the subtleties in the structures of the greater universe.

To understand the motives for Zheng to expand his practice beyond ink painting, it is pertinent to consider the depths of Robert Irwin's influence on Zheng's artistic philosophy. Zheng's first encounter with Irwin's work was in 2013 at the Whitney Museum of American Art. *Scrim veil—Black rectangle—Natural light* (1977), one of Irwin's seminal pieces reinstalled at the Whitney, was created specifically for the fourth floor gallery of the museum. Irwin bisected the cavernous room with a long scrim hung taut with a black metal bar at eye level and painted a black band along the walls of the room, the same width as the black bar. *Scrim veil* elicited pause from the viewer, a moment to orient themselves to the happenings inside the room. At first glance, the room seemed empty. Yet the appearance of the floating black band indicated the presence of an object, indistinguishable as a work of art or a space under construction. Zheng was struck immediately by how Irwin had, with great intention but very minimal disruption, activated the gallery in a way that triggered a cognitive awareness. In an interview with *Artweek*, Irwin states of his practice: "I begin to see things which are in themselves contradictions to the whole logic of seeing. Since we perceive through a system of reference points that we have been conditioned to believe are real...you have a structured

way of looking at the world that means certain things probably are totally invisible.”<sup>55</sup> As Lawrence Weschler puts it, Irwin’s *Scrim veil* prompted the viewer to “perceive [themselves] perceiving.”<sup>56</sup> Using only the architectural elements and the natural light filtering through a large window, Irwin tapped into the viewer’s self-awareness and self-reflexivity of seeing, jarring us out of our habituated ways of seeing. Bringing what is already present, though unnoticed, to the visible plane with such subtle materials, Zheng came to realize he could more directly and powerfully communicate his artistic philosophy to the contemporary audience with materials other than ink. *Scrim veil* led Zheng to search for other ways to activate the mind and body, to create immersive experiences. Although Irwin and Zheng both have an affinity for technology, science and philosophy, it is ultimately their intense curiosity about life and journey to discover ways to extract inspiration and marvel from the seemingly banal which connect the two artists at the core.

*Scrim veil* is an example of Irwin’s site-conditional pieces.<sup>57</sup> In an interview, Irwin explains the term site-conditional:

What is the nature of the game we’re in? Malevich said, No, it’s not “I think, therefore I am”—I feel, and therefore I think, and therefore, I am.

And that is the name of the game. The brain is not in a bell jar, it’s in a

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<sup>55</sup> David Rush, “Robert Irwin,” *Artweek*, February 15, 1975, 4.

<sup>56</sup> Whitney Museum of American Art, “Lawrence Weschler on Robert Irwin,” August 6, 2013, YouTube video, 1:51, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ToR-QNnyfhM&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ToR-QNnyfhM&feature=emb_logo).

<sup>57</sup> The term site-specific refers to artworks that are created in response to and for a certain place. Site-conditional pieces take it a step further by also incorporating the feeling and spirit of a place.



body. All feelings count. Instead of being an artist playing to the concept of art being in a bubble, I left the studio, and I said I'd go anywhere for anyone. That's essentially what a conditional art is. You don't make anything until there's some place or some situation or something that you're going to examine.<sup>58</sup>

Site-conditional essentially studies and relies on the *qiyun*, the spirit, of a space and as Irwin further elaborates, site-conditional means “considering its history, the functions, its elemental qualities, the changes that take place around it, the surroundings, the audience, the architecture.”<sup>59</sup> Site-conditional artworks are bound to be ever shifting, responding to environmental flux, whether it is the change in light quality, atmospheric conditions, or climate. Using and expanding on Irwin's site-conditional methodology, Zheng gains access to and more profoundly studies the idea of *qiyun*. *Liquid Space* and *I Look for the Sky?* are examples of Zheng's venture with this new process. A departure from the broader visualization of cosmic knowledge found in his ink paintings, Zheng's new installations are more nuanced. The pieces aspire to capture and elevate moments of specific spaces, revealing unnoticed details which normally escapes our awareness. For both Irwin and Zheng, their methodology and the art they produce is about phenomenal presence. They endeavor to translate a reality that is not descriptive of an object but rather defines a presence that is intuitive to humans.

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<sup>58</sup> Janelle Zara, “Interviews: Robert Irwin,” Artforum, July 19, 2016, <https://www.artforum.com/interviews/robert-irwin-discusses-his-retrospective-at-the-hirsh-horn-and-a-piece-at-chinati-62299>.

<sup>59</sup> Robert Irwin, *Being and Circumstance: Notes toward a Conditional Art*, (Larkspur Landing, California: Lapis, 1985), 26-27.

*Liquid Space*, enclosed in a prayer room inside the oldest Zen Buddhist temple in Kyoto, uses synthetic mediums to capture ethereal moments that embody the spirit of the site. For the span of a year, Zheng made numerous trips to the temple, observing the changes in seasons and light conditions at various times of day and participating in ritual practices. He spent time studying the character, qualities and history of the temple, noting its intimate connection to the natural elements surrounding it. An ambitious piece, *Liquid Space* includes elements of painting, sculpture, architecture and digital media. Similar to Zheng's paintings, *Liquid Space* essentially erases the artist's presence in the space. Instead, the installation unobtrusively molds to its surroundings. In fact, *Liquid Space* was installed without permanently altering any part of the temple, the components of the artwork could easily be taken down and rehung; no nails were hammered into the walls and no surfaces were altered to accommodate the installation. Similar to the way a magnifying glass reveals the intricacies of a specimen, *Liquid Space* amplifies spiritual moments of the temple, producing unexpected ruminative zones within the prayer room. Synthetic facilitators of the senses, such as mirrors, mesh, acrylic panels, and video screens, were placed strategically throughout the room, generating abstracted scenes akin to those found in traditional ink landscapes, taking inspiration from the subject of the hanging scroll displayed inside the *tokonoma*.<sup>60</sup>

An homage to Irwin's minimalist style and his site-conditional philosophy, *Liquid Space* consists of numerous discrete transcendental encounters. For instance, a light-emitting diode (LED) screen in the proportions of a hanging scroll relays live footage of

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<sup>60</sup> A *tokonoma* is a designated alcove for display of artistic creations, most notably *ikebana* (flower arrangements) and calligraphic or landscape ink scrolls.

the rock pond in the garden adjacent to the prayer room. The image on the screen is abstracted by the camera's zoom onto the water's surface, the ripples in the pond evoking a mesmerizing, meditative quality. The screen, strategically placed in a recessed corner of the prayer room, creates the illusion that the moving image is a window to the outside garden. Another section of the room has a length of taunt black mesh pulled across at eye level with different densities of holes, augmenting the scenery outside the window behind it. When viewing the exterior through the mesh, the image is deconstructed into a raster grid of pixels, generating a blurring effect. The varying sheerness of the material allows for different light densities and depending on the viewer's distance from the partition, the exterior scenery appears to shift in clarity, form and focus: the distant mountain distorted, the trees elongated, adding more points of latitudes and conflict between the foreground and background. Zheng uses these synthetic materials to mediate moments, carefully matching the material to the surrounding nature's energy. The materials themselves become devices that disrupt the mental and physical perception of the views within and outside of the prayer room. The abstracted compositions presented in *Liquid Space* disrupt the boundaries between the real and the imaginary, and mental and physical space. These moments are akin to apertures, ushering the viewer to introspective realms through intentional, framed views. Simulating the ultimate goal of Zen Buddhism, *Liquid Space* strives to present slivers of enlightenment of the mind translated through visual encounters. The viewer must not merely observe, but to actively look, to use the mind to expand the possibilities. This full body experience activates the eye as the receptor and the mind as the translator. In a statement utterly apropos to the ethos of *Liquid Space*, Irwin states of his site-conditional pieces as guides for the viewer, "opening their eyes to

the beauty that's already there.”<sup>61</sup> The experience of *Liquid Space* also is ever flowing and spontaneous, changing with the seasons and bound to the natural elements surrounding the temple. Through the use of various synthetic, man-made materials, Zheng brought into the room filtered reflections of the existent sublime exterior. *Liquid Space* is a play of perception, confounding the distinction between reality and fiction, amplifying the serenity of the natural landscapes surrounding the temple.

When comparing Zheng's practice to Irwin's, there are scores of differences. Irwin was attracted to the sparse, atmospheric desert whereas Zheng would retreat into the dense woods. Even the light and sightlines in those locations are drastically different. The trees in the forest illuminate layered kaleidoscoping patterns, the light from the sky diffused in varying densities whereas the desert has expansive light with nothing blocking the direct light from the sun. This aesthetic contrast can actually be seen in their respective artworks. Irwin's pieces are quiet, minimal, and devoid of material variety, whereas Zheng's installations have a frenetic quality, with a variety of screens, plexiglass, video projections, and even sounds. Thus although Zheng was inspired by Irwin's artistic philosophy, he did not adopt Irwin's aesthetics. Instead Zheng found his own path, focusing on the performance of the materials in his artworks, seeking ways in which they could mediate knowledge to visual forms. In contrast to Irwin, Zheng does not abandon painting. He continuously finds potential in the practice, discovering fresh possibilities that flow to and from his work with video and installation. Zheng believes

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<sup>61</sup> Deborah Vankin, “At 89, Robert Irwin Finds Beauty in the Benign (and Talks about the New Artwork That's Not for Sale — Sort of),” *Los Angeles Times*, February 7, 2018, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-ca-cm-robert-irwin-20180211-htmlstory.html>.

there is an essence in ink painting that can be translated through these other materials. In fact, Zheng once said his installations are “living paintings.”<sup>62</sup> Additionally, Irwin continuously sought to “break the frame,”<sup>63</sup> whereas Zheng’s artworks sought to reframe. For instance, the transcendental moments in *Liquid Space* are experiences Zheng discovered in the prayer room which he isolates and repackages for the viewer. Similar to Zheng’s paintings, these discoveries are facilitated visuals of divine truths and knowledge, already in existence, brought to the conscious plane. However, rather than using ink, acrylic, and paper, *Liquid Space* uses synthetic materials to bring to focus and emphasize the spirituality found in nature.

Although Zheng acknowledges his paintings cannot provide a similar transformative experience as his installation pieces, paintings have their own space and function across his practice. Zheng’s sensitivities to light and its ability to manipulate spatial perception began with his work with ink and acrylic. Zheng is keenly aware of how ink and acrylic seem to recede or protrude according to the light that bounces or is absorbed by the material. In his installations, light is not only a material, but also becomes a manipulator, informing what the viewer sees as reality. Zheng uses light to create space or the absence of light to negate space. Light becomes a tool to illuminate forms, used like a brush, objects touched by it are brought to the forefront whereas spaces left in darkness recede. Light in Zheng’s installation pieces are like the strokes in his

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<sup>62</sup> Jay Xu, Live Conversation between Jay Xu and Zheng Chongbin on May 27, 2020, Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, CA: Zoom, May 27, 2020 at 1:34.

<sup>63</sup> Carol Kino, “The Artist’s Artist: Robert Irwin Continues to Create and Inspire,” Wall Street Journal, December 31, 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-artists-artist-robert-irwin-continues-to-create-and-inspire-1451572502>.

paintings and the darkness the negative space. As seen in *Walking Penumbra*, darkness is heavily contrasted with brightness, creating opaque sharp edged shadows. As an evocation to the work's title, overlapping light, contrasting the effect of layered ink on paper, produces a lighter outer shadow on an opaque object. As German philosopher Gernot Böhme states about the phenomenology of light: "The appearance of things in light is, in fact, emergence from darkness. And it remains that appearance only as long as darkness is not fully extinguished. Things have contour, depth and conciseness in light only in combination with darkness."<sup>64</sup> This play on dark and light is already prevalent in many of Zheng's earlier geometric paintings. For example, *Unfolding Landscape*, a flat paneled piece, imitates the spatial complexity of a folding screen, the sculptural effect produced by the sharp contrast between the dark ink and the brilliant white acrylic.

Light, similar to ink, is an agent that encapsulates Zheng's ecological investigations into connectors across time, cultures and disciplines. Zheng once wrote: "Light and shadow interplay in every aspect of our culture, past and present. Light throws a bridge from our planet to the unknown universe."<sup>65</sup> Its function as a spiritual metaphor in age-old Western devotional paintings and architecture, a signifier of revelation in Daoism, and its role in human visual perception, light is timeless, universal, and everywhere. In a recent interview,<sup>66</sup> Zheng described his awe when visiting the Gothic churches in Europe, where light and architecture enhance and dramatize the religious

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<sup>64</sup> Gernot Böhme, "Light and Space. On the Phenomenology of Light," *Dialogue and Universalism*, vol. 24, no. 4 (2014): 71, <https://doi.org.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/10.5840/du201424491>.

<sup>65</sup> Zheng Chongbin, "Seeing the immeasurable, A meditation from Zheng Chongbin," (unpublished essay, 2020), typescript.

<sup>66</sup> Celia Yang, Interview with Zheng Chongbin, Personal, February 6, 2020.

experience. Whether it is used to create a serene atmosphere to worship the Virgin Mary, or a stark, devout scene of the crucifixion, light is essential to the essence of cathedrals. In *Walking Penumbra*, light functioned as a perceptual manipulator, a visual sensation. Yet it is also tied to the phenomenon of tactility. Flowing photons and rays emit energy, unseen by the naked eye, but sensed as heat on the body. Both the metaphor and physicality of light mirrors Zheng's artistic philosophy to seek and reveal unnoticed truths and realities present around us.

Seven large translucent polyvinyl chloride (PVC) panels hang high up in the vast atrium of the San Francisco Asian Art Museum's Bogart Court, covering the expansive skylight. Behind the polyvinyl chloride panels hangs a mixture of smaller fluid monochromatic panels, which form airy layers like quick brush strokes on paper. *I Look for the Sky?*(2020), Zheng Chongbin's newest installation work, is a multi-modular structure made from synthetic materials of polyvinyl chloride, acrylic sheets, screens and a metal geometric skeleton. The piece has a delicate, weightless appearance, floating above the heads of the audience like an atmospheric ceiling of clouds. Its ethereal presence is enhanced by the interaction between the artificial lights in the atrium and the diffused natural light filtering in from the skylight. The glossed acrylic and PVC sheets, which in themselves have incongruous surfaces, generate apertures which distort the incoming light, the waves refracting, bouncing and transforming shadows and forms into moving elements. The light in *I Look for the Sky?* is transitory, ambiguous, a connector and a performer. Thus *I Look for the Sky?* is constantly in flux, dependent on the changing illumination of the piece. The installation does what his paintings could not; it

expresses the essential message of the *Book of Changes*,<sup>67</sup> the never ending transformation and change of all things. *I Look to the Sky?*, dependent on its environment, continuously transforms.

*I Look for the Sky?* blurs the boundary between perceived and actual space. When looking up at the artwork, the piece is reminiscent of the sightline of a fisherman looking down from his boat at the surface of a frozen lake or a pilot looking down through stormy clouds at an indiscernible landscape. This momentary discombobulation forces the viewer to reassess their own perception of the space, to reorient themselves: am I looking down or am I looking up at the sky? *I Look for the Sky?* can also be viewed from the second level balcony, revealing the dramatic layers of materials behind the enormous PVC panels. From this viewpoint, the composition of the installation is very similar to Zheng's paintings. The monochromatic panels are like Zheng's brushstrokes in elegant three dimensional form. These vantages, combined with transitory light conditions, create a living sculpture and almost infinite perspectives from which one can see the piece. Like *Liquid Space*, *I Look for the Sky?* is site-conditional. It plays with the architecture Gae Aulenti built in the 2003 renovation of the museum's building that once served as the city's Main Library. Aulenti's "V" shaped multi-paneled skylight is directed into the atrium, pulling light into the spacious hall. In contrast, the panels in *I Look for the Sky?* push our perception of the hall upwards, opening and elevating the space to mirror the infinite expanse of the sky. This effect redefines the atrium, creating fractured spaces opposite of Aulenti's sharp, defined Beaux-Arts architecture. *I Look for the Sky?* is meant

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<sup>67</sup> While the *Book of Changes* existed before the founding of Daoism, Daoists have widely adapted the tenants and stories in the book as their own.



to open up the heavy inner space of the atrium to the outer, natural elements to bring in a contemplative, perceptual experience for the viewer.

*I Look for the Sky?* produces infinite moments for the mind to wander. Similar to the function of negative space in traditional Chinese paintings, the encounters Zheng creates in *I Look to the Sky?* permits introspection. Based on *woyou* found in traditional Daoist landscape paintings, the piece intentionally contains blank spaces so the mind can complete the visual journey. Forcing the viewer to look up, *I Look to the Sky?* conjures the daydreams and meandering thoughts one has when looking at the sky. Thoughts encompassing an individual's memories, anxieties, and biases are all imagined existences that inform how we engage with our environment. The viewer becomes the performer and cannot help but bring forth the geological, social constructions shaped by our histories to generate novel interactions with the artwork. This cognitive experience is not only a by-product of Zheng's Daoist foundations, but echoes Irwin's approach of extricating the phenomenological experience. As Michael Govan said of Irwin's work, that most appropriately reflects Zheng's recent installation pieces as well, "the work asks questions about what you're seeing — he often puts you off-kilter — and that investigation you have with the work, once you feel it, you own it for yourself."<sup>68</sup> *I Look for the Sky?* encourages viewers to awaken, to be attuned to transitions in the everyday world, miniscule moments that can reveal truths and insights into the beautiful connections that tie humans to the rest of the chaotic world.

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<sup>68</sup> Vankin, "At 89, Robert Irwin Finds Beauty in the Benign (and Talks about the New Artwork That's Not for Sale — Sort of)."

Zheng's recent installations inspire a reshuffling of the mental and physical senses. The pieces cultivate awareness of unnoticed truths in the interconnected cosmos. Zheng activates the bodies of his audience to then reach their inner consciousness, full participation of mind, body and soul required. Similar to the subtlety found in traditional Daoist Chinese ink paintings, Zheng frames contemplative moments in his installations, yet it is the viewer's individualized human perception which completes the work. In this way, it is easy to see the similarities between the ethos behind the Light and Space movement and Daoist Chinese paintings. Both employ minimalist methods to open up the realm of possibilities to engage with the world and bring viewers to an enlightened state. By extracting the contemporary techniques and materials found in the Light and Space movement, Zheng generates a beautiful compromise between the Western aesthetic and traditional Chinese sensibility in his site-conditional works. Although synthetic panels and metal structures are a far departure from ink and paper, Zheng maintains his aesthetic of elegant, fluid monochromatic compositions. Furthermore, his site-conditional installations, in contrast to his paintings, have a sense of immortality to them. There is a permanence in synthetic materials that is not present in ink and paper, which may succumb to decay with time.

## CONCLUSION

“Art has always been a pathway to this fuzzy world. It's full of probabilities and chance...Culture and nature need to share the same place; society, all living beings and this planet relate to each other. This is the puzzle, the challenge we face: to create patterns that manifest what we affect and are affected by.”

- Zheng Chongbin

During a video call, Zheng Chongbin, seated in his brightly lit studio in Northern California, spoke with me about the many projects he is juggling during the pandemic: a site-conditional work in the South of France, an exhibition in Hong Kong, a solo installation at the San Francisco Asian Art Museum, and a proposal in progress for the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Zheng is busy. Yet he is not a hermitic artist, often engaging in public conversations and interviews. He is in frequent dialogue with scholars and curators, and enjoys active exchanges about his ideas and philosophy. In an effort to capture Zheng's thoughtful voice, quotes from interviews and personal essays are deeply woven within the fabric of this thesis. In fact, the approach to his practice and philosophy began with suggestions of resources and readings recommended by Zheng himself. His artistic practice is an extension of this gusto to share and exchange knowledge. Zheng believes art has the freedom to pioneer possibilities, to present hypotheses without the burden of validation. In conversation with philosophy and the sciences, Zheng's art probes and questions the state of human existence and being, unconstrained by the demands of proof.

Zheng's artworks are visually serene, but can be cerebrally challenging. Whimsical performances, his pieces are melodic dances between blacks and whites, delicate symphonies of light and darkness projecting entropic energies. His art seeks to

unveil experiences from existent matter, emphasizing the interconnectedness of experience and materiality. This he began with ink. “Whether I can ‘transform’ myself and ‘shine forth’ light to break open time and space replete with life is all determined by ink, through ink, and with ink.”<sup>69</sup> Zheng sees ink as a metonym to Daoist notions, aligning with his epiphanic visions of the beautiful, unnoticed connections in the world. His ink paintings are a contemporary exegesis of the physical and mental experience of viewing traditional Chinese ink landscape paintings. Additionally, the material of ink embodies the Daoist spirit, a quintessential element of Chinese history and culture that forms the foundation of Zheng’s practice. Although Zheng’s most recent works seem to have moved beyond the painting practice, there is a hyper-pollination between the mediums he uses; his pieces constantly cross-referencing in form and in concept. The synthetic and digital materials in Zheng’s video and installation pieces are a way to bring the *qiyun* of the ancient medium of ink to contemporary discourse. The new materials provide fresh angles and encounters, more possibilities to frame perspectives.

The search for avenues towards enlightenment is fundamental to Zheng’s artistic practice. His monochromatic paintings and installations function as visualizations of his examination of broad ontological questions about the nature and origin of existence, being, and reality. Zheng canvases our ecosystem to reveal fragments of divine phenomena: overlooked formal similarities between tree branches and the mammalian cardiovascular system or the echo of cloud formations in ripples of water. Zheng’s artworks carve a pathway for the viewer to be released from anthropomorphism which

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<sup>69</sup> Zheng Chongbin, “My Reading of Shitao’s Remarks on Painting,” in Zheng Chongbin: Impulse, Matter, Form (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2014), 80.

blinds us to the tender connections linking humanity to the rest of the natural world. They distill the consciousness into hyperawareness, in turn manifesting phenomena from the quotidian and turning the invisible visible. Zheng builds his artistic vision by extracting ideas from Western metaphysical philosophy, such as the methodology of phenomenology, or, the interconnectivity of ecology, and places them in dialog with Daoist principles, especially those visualized in ancient Chinese ink paintings. Layered notions across periods, disciplines, and cultures, Zheng's artworks communicate universal insights despite their abstract forms. Humans however are not universal, each individual coded to process experiences in distinctive ways based on our biases, egos, and histories. Thus Zheng sees the infinite possibilities of relying on the human vessel for interpretation.

Zheng's methodology extracts the seepage between cultures, histories, and disciplines; his singular artistic philosophy and practice is unsubscribed to any one canon or lineage. As art critic Harold Rosenberg (1906-1978) said: "The aim of every authentic artist is not to conform to the history of art but to release himself from it in order to replace it with his own history."<sup>70</sup> The questions Zheng challenges are beyond temporal or cultural boundaries; he explores cosmic theories, the notion of timelessness, and existential propositions. His search for knowledge is a universal human endeavor. As such, to label Zheng's practice as merely Chinese art or ink art limits the signification and possibility his artwork inspires. In Zheng's own words: "There is no meaning in my work...my work only has the material characteristic of its own [self], a code of physical

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<sup>70</sup> Harold Rosenberg, *Art on the Edge: Creators and Situations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 64.

evidence that becomes the narrative. As a result, my work cannot be categorized. It is the style of no style.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Abby Chen, “Works and Interview.” *White Ink* (San Francisco: Chinese Culture Foundation of San Francisco, 2011), 41.

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