

VARIATIONS IN INK

Power and Poetry in the Art of Singapore Artist Zhuang Shengtao

8 March to 8 April 2016



Reflection V, 1996, Chinese ink on paper, 35 x 46 cm

Exhibition reading material
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A Short Biography

Although Zhuang Shengtao (庄声涛) is a Singapore artist, his long and frequent sojourns overseas has kept him away from local public attention for much of his artistic career. During this period of media seclusion, Zhuang has spent his time in exploring the myriad qualities of ink as a medium; pushing the frontiers of this traditional medium by incorporating it with contemporary aesthetics. The works at this exhibition, meticulously curated to showcase the facets of Zhuang's artistic oeuvre, is an opportunity for the public to behold selected pieces from different phases of the artist's work.

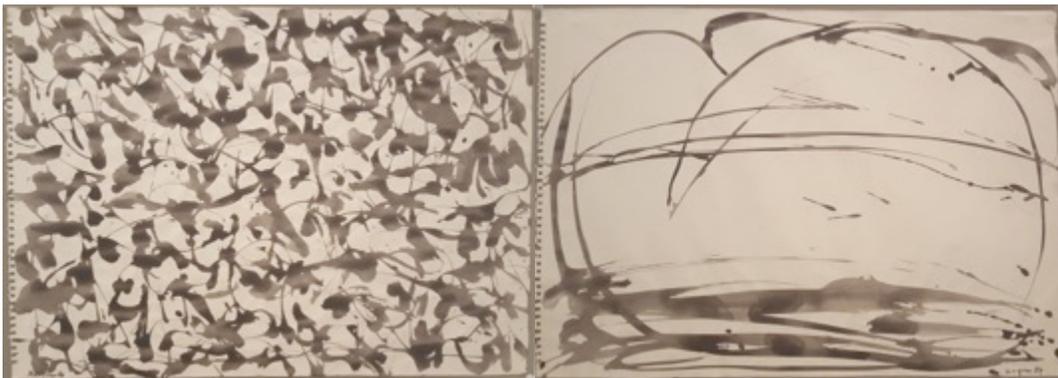
Zhuang was born in Guangdong province, China, in 1944. In 1955, he migrated to Singapore with his family for the opportunities that the country offered. In his secondary school period, Zhuang's calligraphy entry won first prize in a competition, where See Hiang Tuo (施香沱) was one of the judges. After becoming acquainted with See, Zhuang wrote a letter to the master a few years later in 1964, which became the starting point of a lasting discipleship. As a student under See, he was exposed to the many scripts of Chinese calligraphy. In particular, he spent his early years practicing *Shi Gu Wen* (石鼓文), an ancient script in the calligraphy tradition. His calligraphy-centered training gave him insights into the intricacies of treating calligraphy as an art form. In a published article that was written by Zhuang, he stressed that the functional and the aesthetic quality of calligraphy should be distinguished separately. Calligraphy that is written to be read is different from calligraphy written as an art form. In any case, the artistic license that is in the latter often overrides the functional aspect of a character.

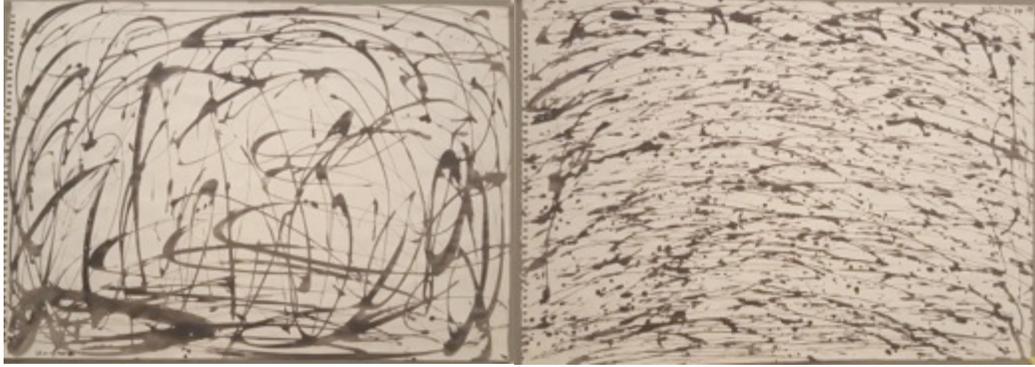
In 1964, Zhuang enrolled in the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) as a part time student. Lecturers such as Georgette Chen and Lim Mu Hue (林木化) introduced him to media like charcoal, acrylic, and oil. His explorations of these media had led him to the realization that, unlike charcoal, ink is a medium that cannot be altered nor erased once it is on paper. The stark black on white paper doesn't allow for timidity from the artist. As such, the artist may only forge ahead with courage and determination in using ink as a medium. Despite Zhuang's explorations of other media in school, privately the artist always returned to the medium of ink – the preoccupation with finding an expression that resonates with contemporary sensibilities had always remained his objective.

Zhuang's Scholarly Pursuits

Zhuang's excellent academic results in high school led to the award of a government bursary, which provided him with the impetus to study at Nanyang University. (now National University of Singapore) In lieu of Art Studies, Zhuang chose Chinese Classics, as the university did not have an Arts faculty in the 70s. The university provided Zhuang with the environment for self-realization. He read widely; while being instructed in Chinese classical texts in university, he was also studying the liberal arts on his own, including modern literature and philosophy. To maximize his time for reading and studying, he would remain in the university over semester breaks, perusing over academic texts in solitude and silence. Although Zhuang did not have the opportunity to do Art Studies at the tertiary level, he did not allow this to be a hurdle in his development as an artist. He focused his B.A. dissertation on Su Shi (1037 – 1101), a revered figure in Chinese culture who adopted the literary name Su Dongpo (蘇東坡). A statesman of the Song dynasty who oversaw important civil engineering projects, Su Dongpo was also an artist and a philosopher, whose calligraphy painting resonates with the form of Chan Buddhism that was later revived in the Song dynasty.

After Zhuang's completion of his B.A, the adverse economic conditions in Singapore in the 70s convinced him to continue his studies in Nanyang University. He thus went on to pursue a Master degree in Chinese Classics. Looking back on that period, Zhuang attributes paramount importance to these formative years as a scholar, noting that "An artist is not only a person who can draw and paint. How an artist makes art is related to the process of thought and the accumulation of knowledge. This (intellectual process) is vital in helping the artist understand himself and his search for an identity."





The artist's experimentations in brushstrokes in the 80s

Zhuang's Sojourns

In the mid 70s, Zhuang worked as a teacher and painted landscape scenes at the same time. The limitations of Singapore for works of this genre began to manifest themselves. As Zhuang wrote in one of his publications, the unchanging season and the lack of a natural panorama made him feel misplaced and disconnected from the artistic legacy of China. After some encouragement by a French educated Vietnamese friend, Zhuang visited France in 1981, in particular spending most of his time in the museums and galleries of Paris. The different interpretations of Abstract Expressionism by artists like Marc Chagall, Victor Vasarely, and Nicolas de Staël expanded Zhuang's vista of artistic possibilities. Zhuang was most impressed by the vivid colour blocks of Staël and the vitality of Pablo Picasso's multi-faceted works, which had the effect of spurring Zhuang to review his ideas of pictorial structure, space and texture in a new light. Upon his return to Singapore, Zhuang, animated by what he has seen in France, began on experimentations of abstraction based on his extensive training in the calligraphy tradition – his firm grasp of the brushstrokes and his knowledge of the qualities of ink.

In the same year, Zhuang embarked on another trip to New York to continue his journey of artistic discovery. There, the encounter with a big city, and the sight of large-scale works of Pollock in the Museum of Modern Art conjoined to impress and overwhelm Zhuang. He immediately started on a series of large pieces once he returned to Singapore. The issues of scale, space, and volume were questions that the artist had to answer through artistic investigation. As a calligraphy artist, Zhuang faced the problem of composing the white space of the paper according to aesthetic considerations. The issue of filling up the wide expanse of white with a few calligraphy characters was also a challenge that had to be confronted by the artist.



Symphony

The culmination of Zhuang's artistic experimentations

In 1988, Zhuang moved to Seattle to study Western art. The period of three years in which Zhuang spent in Seattle gave him the opportunity to witness the changing of seasons and the boundless open landscape in Seattle. Nature herself became the protagonist in Zhuang's artistic development. To Zhuang, nature is a resource from which he can draw from. The poetry of autumn in Seattle so impressed Zhuang that he sought to capture its essence in his paintings, consciously eliminating extraneous details to express the intrinsic beauty of autumn through sparse aesthetics.

To Zhuang, his paintings of autumn and nature that were completed in the late 80s are part of the *Xie Yi* (写意) style. In history, this style of painting is related to the *literati* class in traditional Chinese society, specifically the segment of society that are educated and considered Imperial scholars. Lacking the formalist art training of the academic court painters, scholars of the *literati* class relied on their training in calligraphy brushwork to freely express an individualized perspective on the subject matter. A profound understanding of the subject matter is required to properly convey its essence. The emphasis on self-expression within the *literati* tradition correlates to the artist's leanings towards the philosophy of Taoism. The paintings that were completed in the 80s and 90s period are especially expressive of the artist's personal renditions of the Taoist philosophy. His monochrome works featuring a toned-down color palette is reflective of Lao Zi's (老子) teachings – that 'the five colors blind the eye' and confuse the senses. Yet, Zhuang's monochrome works are by no means a blank dark canvas. The artist combines the different tonalities of ink within a painting to sensitive

the viewer towards the subtle gradient differences of this medium. Zhuang's painting titled *Deepness* is an apt illustration of the Chinese saying that 'Chinese ink has 5 colours'. The interplay of ink and paper conjures up a myriad of possibilities. Indeed, the painting *Deepness* draws the view in with its resonance of mystery and luminosity. To illustrate the scale of nature in his paintings, Zhuang hints at its vastness with his Mountain series. Despite the fact that the dimension of the painting itself only measures 57 cm by 87 cm, monumentality is expressed by drawing the eye upwards to the top of the painting, much like how one's vision is drawn to the peak of a distant mountain.



Part of the Ink Series



Woodcut (Mountain) Series

Over the long and undulating course of his artistic career, Zhuang has never veered away from the medium of ink. Despite the contemporary aesthetics that his works exude, Zhuang's calligraphy training as well as his belief system situates him soundly within the Chinese art tradition. Having dedicated his life to exploring the subtleties of ink and to the unraveling of its inscrutability, Zhuang is now at the culmination of his artistic practice. Although the path towards spiritual and artistic actualization is one of solitude and perhaps loneliness, it is also a state of complete freedom and nondependence on worldly sustenance – a philosophical teaching from Zhuang Zi (莊子) that the artist finds resonance with. It is for this

reason that the artist unrelentingly persists his practice in this singular medium, placing his own journey above commercial or financial reward. The authenticity and sincerity of Zhuang's art is unparalleled in this aspect.