

BOOK REVIEWS

CZIRÁKOVÁ ZHANG, Daniela. *Breaking the Ink: Abstract Ink Art in Mainland China*. Bratislava: Veda, Institute of Oriental Studies, 2020. 272 pp. ISBN 978-80-224-1841-6

The new book by Daniela Zhang Cziráková provides an excellent survey of the situation in Chinese abstract art. The attention of contemporary art critics is mostly focused on the Chinese avant-garde, as exemplified by the role of Gao Minglu, the art critic who had organised the iconic exhibition *1989 China/Avant-Garde*. Among the many books in English devoted to contemporary art in China, such as Gao Minglu's *Total Modernity, Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China* by the late Michael Sullivan, or several books written by Wu Hong, there are not very many about Chinese ink painting after the 1980s. However, several important exhibitions were staged overseas, such as *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China* by Maxwell K. Hearn, and *Encres de Chine Expérimentales* by Chen Hongshan, Zhang Yu and Emmanuel Lincot. Accompanying catalogues from these and other exhibitions are the very few publications focused on contemporary Chinese ink art. Interestingly, there were several exhibitions of contemporary Chinese artists in the Czech Republic, showing the works of Xu Bing, or Qiu Dehua, as well as those of six artists belonging to the New Literati painting of the 1980s and 1990s.

Given the circumstances, *Breaking the Ink. Abstract Ink Art in Mainland China* is the first monograph wholly devoted to Chinese abstract ink painting, and is based on long-term fieldwork. The author, trained at the Central Academy of Arts, has been carrying out research on this important topic ever since, and has presented it in a number of research articles. In her book, Zhang Cziráková first explains her use of the term 'ink art' instead of the customary 'ink painting'. Her definition includes not only paintings executed in ink, but also performances and installations involving ink and Chinese paper, for example Wang Nanming's *Balls of Calligraphy*. From the very beginning, she also points out many controversial views about abstraction. Certain views are typical of Chinese art critics in the West and the different opinions on this topic in China.

The book is divided into five sections. The first section (Sources and Inspirations for the Development of Abstract Ink Painting in Mainland China in Chinese Art History) presents a necessary historical overview of traditional Chinese painting, calligraphy and theories of art. The second section (Inspiration from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan) elaborates on the sources of inspiration for Chinese abstract art coming from nearby regions. Art in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan exercised a significant influence on the development of modern Chinese art. In this section, Zhang Cziráková documents their impact on the mainland ink art movements, abstract ink art in particular.

In the third part (Tradition and Modernity, Chinese Ink Art from Contemporary to Abstract), the author explains the difficulties and challenges of mainland China's cultural

scene after the year 1979. During that period, many books, art journals, and translations of Western literature and philosophy started to appear in China. An enormous range of visual styles, including realism, abstraction, abstract expressionism, symbolism, and photorealism, came from the West. The author writes about the changes which characterized the cultural atmosphere in Chinese society at that time, emphasizing the 85 New Wave. This movement was the first mature avant-garde movement in mainland China, culminating in the exhibition at the China Art Gallery in Beijing. Zhang Cziráková introduces the first artists who started to paint abstract ink artworks in the late 1980s, as well as the 'semi-abstract' artists connected with the 85 New Wave avant-garde: Xu Bing, Gu Wenda, and Yang Jiechang, all of whom now reside abroad. Finally, she introduces Wang Chuan who produced abstract ink paintings somewhat later.

The last two sections of the book are devoted to abstract ink art in contemporary China. The author recounts in detail its development, and describes what kind of difficulties the artists encountered. She traces the essential art movements from the 1990s until the present days.

The fourth section (The Movement of Experimental Ink and Wash and its Relation to Abstract Ink Art) is entirely devoted to the movement that formed Chinese avant-garde ink art in the course of the subsequent two decades. A significant part of the movement was 'Experimental Ink and Wash' which played a crucial role in forming abstract ink art. In this context, ink was not only a media, but also became the symbol of artists' cultural identity, and a connection with the generations of ancient masters.

The final section (Abstract Ink Painting in China Beyond and After the Movement of Experimental Ink and Wash) describes some other movements, for example, Abstract Calligraphy, also called False Calligraphy, Maximalism, Yi Pai, and the most recent Neo-modernism. It also introduces artists creating outside these movements. The author observes the differences and similarities between the artists who belong to the different art movements. She notes that while some artists tend to participate in more than one movements, others are less inclined to join any. The artists featuring in her book, however, represent a selection made by the author. Zhang Cziráková was interested in the entire development and interaction of ink art, rather than in amassing the names of all the artists who were ever inclined towards abstract ink art. As she explains in the conclusion, the social changes which took place during the last thirty years also caused changes in attitudes towards abstract ink art. The importance of ink as the primary media and its significance for artists are gradually fading.

The book is richly illustrated with almost a hundred colour plates. The majority of them were provided directly by the artists, some by their gallerists. Most of them have not been published outside China.

Breaking the Ink is the first comprehensive study on abstract ink art in contemporary Chinese art. It opens up a topic which used to be overlooked not only in the West, but even in China. This is the book's main achievement and contribution. It can be read as an informed introduction to the contemporary Chinese art scene, seen from another perspective. The book is therefore highly recommended for anyone engaged with contemporary Chinese art, or just interested in abstract art worldwide.

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