

SFGATE

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ENTERTAINMENT

Ink painter Zheng goes full circle with new show

By Tamara Straus

May 18, 2011



Zheng Chongbin's "Evaporation," an ink and acrylic on paper work from 2011, will be on exhibit at the Chinese Cultural Center.

Zheng Chongbin/Courtesy of the artist

Chinese ink painter Zheng goes full circle

Zheng Chongbin has been called the Jackson Pollock of Chinese ink painting. It's an analogy that may help bring attention to his stunning, large-scale abstract paintings but one that Zheng resents, because Pollock manically poured and dripped oils onto canvas – whereas Zheng layers and enmeshes ink onto Xuan rice paper, using a physical technique that goes back thousands of years. Yet Zheng, like Pollock, seems to be drawing a bull's-eye on tradition. Born in Shanghai, he studied calligraphy and ink painting at the China National Academy of Fine Arts in the 1980s, where he and his fellow students were exposed to visiting artists from overseas.

"I sensed a limitation in Chinese paintings," explains Zheng. "Everything had become very formulaic. I looked at abstract paintings from the West, and there was an astonishing physicality. I never wanted to let go of the core things in Chinese painting, such as how to utilize space through your body gesture, but I learned to make new textures, introduced elements of light and looked for a new way to generate my basic visual structures."

In 1991, Zheng was selected by the San Francisco Art Institute to become its first international fellow. Here, he immersed himself in performance and installation art – a detour, says Chinese Culture Center curator Abby Chen, which "allowed him a means to understand his new artistic environment and the practice of Western contemporary art unrestrained by the cultural burden of ink." But now, says Chen, he has returned to ink with vigor.

The results of this return are on view tonight at the Chinese Culture Center on the third floor of San Francisco's Chinatown Hilton. There through July 30 are 15 newly commissioned paintings that demonstrate Zheng's extraordinary talents. Not only are the paintings arresting in their beauty – some summon woods dappled with light, others the innards of waterfalls – but they make you think about one of the oldest continuous artistic traditions (Chinese ink painting dates to 400 B.C.), the continuing march of abstract painting, and the rising power of bicultural artists like Zheng who combine and transcend disparate traditions.

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In addition to the paintings, Zheng has created a video piece and an installation that riff on and explain the underpinnings of his artwork. The free solo show, called "**White Ink**," is a huge feat for the Chinese Culture Center. Chen and Mabel Teng, the center's executive director, selected Zheng from a competition process and have been working with the artist and fundraising for the show for an entire year.

"We are trying to dispel the myth that Chinatown is insular, that we don't have quality art," says Teng. "White Ink" should do the trick.

The free opening, 5-7 p.m. tonight at 750 Kearny St., will be followed by a \$25 7-9 p.m. benefit for the Northern Japan Earthquake Relief Fund, called **Sumie Sounds**, featuring jazz and Sumie ink painting. For more information, go to www.c-c-c.org or call (415) 986-1822.

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