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ABSTRACTION AND REFINEMENT: CONTEMPORARY CHINESE INK PAINTINGS

Curated by Tiffany Beres

17 Jan – 9 Feb 2014 @ Gajah Gallery

Gajah Gallery is proud to showcase four of China's most acclaimed avant-garde ink artists: Gu Gan (b. 1942), Qiu Deshu (b.1948), Wang Tiande (b. 1960) and Wei Ligang (b.1964). Displaying the influences of both Western abstraction and the Chinese calligraphic tradition, these four abstract ink pioneers have transformed the visual language of Chinese painting into new gestures of "ink" expressionism--tearing, conceptualizing, burning, and extracting. Without dispelling the influence the past, in his own way, each artist strives to break down the barriers of traditional ink painting to evoke a more universal significance.

This exhibition will be in tandem with renowned Chinese artist Gu Wenda's project at Art Stage Singapore 16 – 19 Jan 2014 entitled *Ink Identity*, which is also curated by Tiffany Beres. **Gu Wenda (b.1955)** is celebrated for his groundbreaking experimental ink art practice and use of human genetic material.

Nominated as one of Asia's top galleries, these 2 projects demonstrate Gajah Gallery's growing affluence in attracting top international artists to the region and providing them exceptional platforms of exhibit.

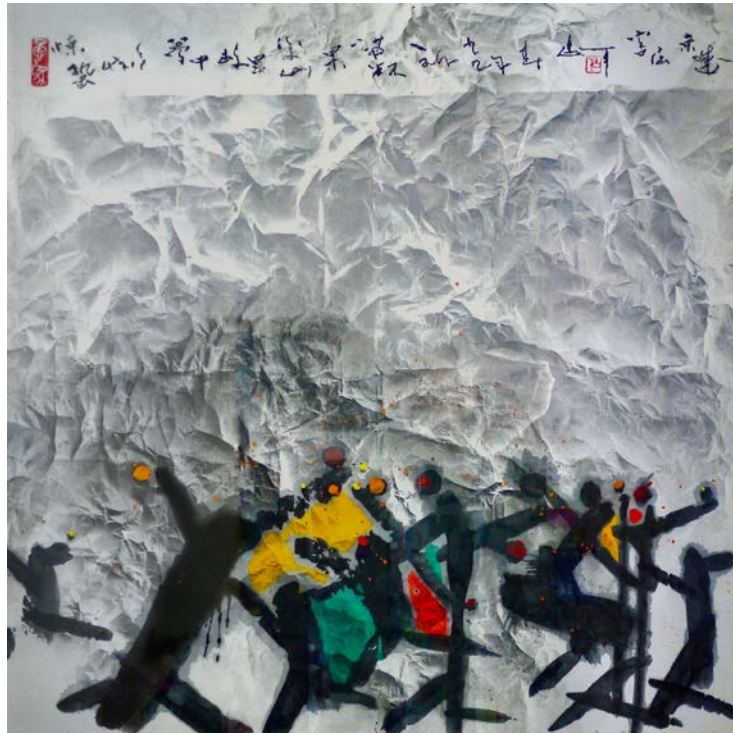
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Gu Gan

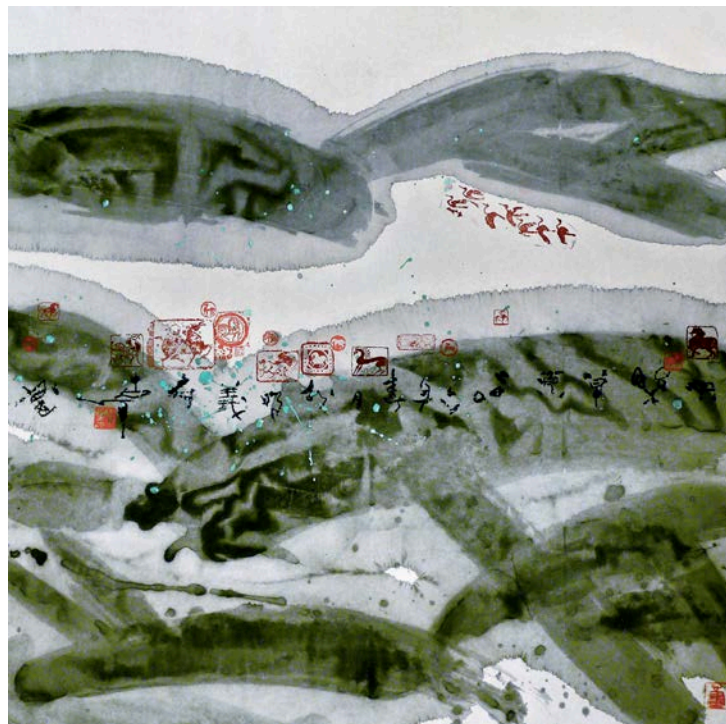
Gu Gan is internationally recognized as the pioneer of the Modernist Movement in calligraphic painting. In the late 1970s, when China began opening up, Gu Gan became interested in investigating and revitalizing calligraphy as a means of propelling Chinese art tradition forward and discovering a universal art aesthetic. The artist began experimenting with forms, scripts, compositions, arrangements and colors. He eventually formed the Modernist School of Chinese Calligraphy, whose basic principle is that characters should go beyond literal meaning to also serve as a figurative language to express artistic meaning.

From his dazzling graffiti-like colored surfaces to his more subtle black and white compositions exploring the potential of abstraction within Chinese painting and calligraphy, Gu Gan's artistic mission has always been to conscientiously interpret the ancient tradition of calligraphy, but not to simply repeat the past. In ancient Chinese calligraphy, the average person could only write using black and white; historically only the emperor could write in red. In 1985, at the age of 43, Gu decided for the first time to use color in his calligraphy. Afterwards, he increasingly took even more audacious steps: incorporating Western drawing techniques, and abstract art, into traditional calligraphy. Calligraphy became painting and painting became calligraphy.

Gu Gan's pictorial subjects have evolved over the years: figures, emotions, spirituality, and nature have been the inspiration for many of the artist's paintings. In the early 2000s, the artist developed his own textured paper in Sichuan, and he has continued to draw ideas from the organic patterns of the paper's course-grain and bark. Most of Gu Gan's paintings are embellished with an added pictorial element—the red impression of the artist's seals (chops), the traditional mark of an office, family, or personal signature in Asia. In boyhood, seal carving was how Gu Gan first learned about characters. In maturity, Gu has gone on to carve hundreds of seals that not only form classic Chinese characters, but also form pictorial symbols and ideas, which, when impressed onto the painting surface, form a vivid dialogue with the artist's painted forms.



Gu Gan, Mountain Forest, 1999, Ink and color rice paper, 88 x 88 cm



Gu Gan, The Sunny Grasslands, 2006, Ink and color rice paper, 88 x 88 cm

Qiu Deshu

For more than thirty years, Qiu Deshu has steered a steady course between traditional ink painting and the brash experiments of the avant-garde with his signature style of artistic creation called “fissuring” (*liebian*). Fission reflects the concept of “independent spirit, independent technique, and independent style,” which was put forward by the Caocao Society (Grass Society) that the artist established in Shanghai in 1979. Fissuring, which literally means tearing and change in Chinese, is a pictorial metaphor for the artist’s life and as his artistic career, as well as modern China and the world. In these works, Qiu applies ink or vivid colors to *xuan* paper (Chinese painting paper), which he tears up and mounts as fragments to a base layer, often leaving gaps between the layers of paper to create a pictorial field with the “cracks” that he feels are symbolic of life’s journey. In this way, each resulting work of fission is both painted and sculpted.

Qiu Deshu’s time-consuming artistic method breaks the rules of classical Chinese ink painting in order to establish an entirely new technique of contemporary art creation. The color in Qiu’s work is revealed from the background rather than the rice paper foreground, so his works develop an organic sensation of darkness and lightness, similar to bass-relief. Since there is no brush involved and forms are built up by hand, layer by layer, each of Qiu Deshu’s distinctive works showcases the richness and texture of the *xuan* paper. This textual quality is certainly evident in the artist’s landscapes, Qiu’s best-known series. Inspired by the crags and peaks of traditional Chinese mountainscapes, here the artist’s vivid color choice and fissuring technique reveals his own majestic view of nature. In the past two years, the artist’s latest series of monochromatic abstract paintings has taken him back to the origins of fissuring. In these deconstructed geometric forms, we discover the artist refining the dynamic power and rhythm of fissuring, in a search for the most essential properties ink on paper.



Qiu Deshu, Fissuring 13030, 2013, Ink & Acrylic on Xuan Paper and Canvas 122 x 244 cm



Qiu Deshu, Fissuring – Landscape No.5, 2010, Ink & Acrylic on Xuan Paper and Canvas 188 x 81 cm

Wei Ligang

Since the mid-1980s, Wei has been studying and innovating modern calligraphy in order to explore the possibilities of ink brush creation and the written language. Trained as a mathematician, Wei Ligang's works are unified in their underlying pursuit of aesthetic patterns and forms, the transition between chaos and order. Although his works display some characteristics of Western modern art and abstraction, for Wei, calligraphy offers many possibilities for establishing a kind of Eastern abstract art system. Generally speaking, the artist's paintings have three distinctive features that are inseparably linked to the Chinese ink tradition: an unreserved focus on Chinese characters, a conceptual examination of the structure of these characters, and an emphasis on the strokes and ink expression of the characters as opposed to the representative aspect of the words themselves.

Wei Ligang constantly deconstructs and re-forms the characters in his paintings while hinting at traditional calligraphy script-forms; some works contain the written word, others just contain the character's strokes, lines, and structural elements. The artist's systematic and bold application of color, a topic rarely explored in the traditional Chinese calligraphy, further showcases the expressive capacity of calligraphy. Wei's freehand gold-paint or gold-ground paintings take classical poetry and the artist's musings as their subject, which are then expressed with unconventional character forms and painterly ideas. In other series, the artist utilizes experimental ink and calligraphic patterns mixed with new materials like acrylic, lacquer and propylene, with the aim of bridging the abstract expression of Chinese and Western paintings.



Wei Ligang, The City Seagull Takes to the Islets of Luzhou, 2011, Gold Paint on Black Paper, 91 x 85 cm



Wei Ligang, Blue Diamonds, 2009, Ink and Color on Paper, 245 x 123 cm

Wang Tiande

Wang Tiande's Digital series of calligraphy and landscapes is a modern conversation about tradition that has been evolving for more than a decade. In 2002, when Wang was preparing for an exhibition in France, he dropped some cigarette ash on a piece of Chinese paper, immediately burning a hole. The artist was enraptured with the resulting burn mark, a mark that was organic yet well-defined like a brush stroke, and yet also had the appearance of being engraved on something as delicate as paper—from that moment he knew that he had found a new artistic course. The artist's Digital series is defined by its layers of meaning: Wang's paintings have a top layer that has been burned (most recently using incense), and a bottom layer that is a traditional ink painting. When mounted together as such, the layers take on new significance: the traditional ink paintings may be concealed behind the burned forms but they cannot be eliminated. Like the process of collecting information in our modern digital age, the physical qualities represented by these discrete art values, come together to transmit and convey meaning.

Most recently, Wang has begun experimenting with incorporating additional layers into his compositions in the form of stone rubbings. For centuries in China, stone slabs or steles have been inscribed with Chinese characters as a means of transmission and preservation. Familial histories, canonical texts, and spiritual revelations are engraved onto these unyielding stones, in part to weather the passing of time. These rubbings, taken by laying paper onto the intaglio stone surface and tamping the paper with ink pads, add another level of interpretation and to Wang's pictorial surface. Existing independently, and yet also highlighting the burned "engraving" marks, these stone rubbings also redefine the boundaries between painting and carving, and the construction and deconstruction of meanings and pictorial forms.



Wang Tiande, Digital No 13 – MHST010, 2013, xuan paper, pi paper, ink and burn marks, 93 x 147 cm