

*With a Sudden Vigor it Doth Possess:*  
Zheng Chongbin's Recent Paintings and Video Work  
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Twenty years ago, Deconstruction was the most over-used word in the art world. Its origin went two decades further back, and the French philosopher Jacques Derrida gets credit for coining it. His intent in doing so was not in any service to a new philosophical understanding, but was instead a demonstration that the very idea of philosophical understanding was fatally tied to what he called "the metaphysics of presence," which in his view always defaulted to assumptions that privileged the historical lies told by power at the colonizing expense of other stories. For several decades, art has at long last labored to give form and voice to those stories, or, working in another register, has tried to lay bare the representational mechanisms of meaning-making disassociated from the idealizing gloss of "artistry." The results of these pursuits oftentimes looked more like a conjectural algebra of open-ended (read: isolated) visual symptoms than anything that we might think of as being an integrated work of art.

Given that so much has been written about the deconstruction of artistic form during the past four decades, it might now be time to look at the work of some artists as being "preconstructive" in its essential character. I mean to suggest that such works are not to be taken as any exercise in ideological codification that invite arguments for or against the ways that they finesse the conflict between myth and history. Instead they should be seen as reminders of what a pre-coded state of physical and emotional being might look, and more importantly, feel like. This recognition should not be read as an invitation to erase the boundary between form and chaos; instead, we should see it as a prompt to recognize the fact that the very ideas of form and chaos are both misleading illusions of not outright falsehoods. Certainly, both are psychologically necessary aids to our navigation of life's path, but for that very reason, they are also fun house mirrors that selectively reflect and refract the planes and angles of experience in ways that divert us from understanding its vital core.

Anyone who has ever mixed paint should know something about the fluctuating boundary between form and chaos. That same person should also know about the marvelous flows of coalescence and dispersal that occur when two or more colors are blended into each other. This is an understandable fascination, at once teased by a simple exercise in practical chemistry and at the same time richly suggestive of the microcosmic and macrocosmic processes that animate and order the world's being. In those slipstream moments before the fluidity of paint solidifies into stable tangibility, we see intimations of the energetic processes that reveal the *prima materia* of nature as being a dynamic force that exists in advance of the world's forms. Once we have registered this fact, we can then understand how those energetic processes continue to subtly inhabit all tangible things, which in many cases are but deceptive masks of momentary convenience operating in deferential relation to the differentiating powers of language. In other words, such visible flowings have the potential to taunt those feeble and paltry thing that we call words.

In so doing, they also taunt you and me for relying too heavily on the things that they can do for us.

For Zheng Chongbin, the transformative dance that occurs between the coalescence and dispersal of fluid material is nothing less than the great subject of his impressive and seductive art. It is at once rooted in the fourteen hundred year-old tradition of Chinese landscape painting, and at the same time it is also a radical departure from that tradition, pointed in the direction of contemporary ideas about the alignment of geomantic ideas and geological structures replacing biologically-derived “anthropocene” metaphors as the presiding symbols of a newly emergent global culture. 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. For Smithson, art existed as a way of self-consciously participating in processes that reveal themselves to be traces of visible energy and material marking the time of their own formulation, and the question of whether or not there might be any human direction of this process, or any coherent human motivation behind that direction, are at best trifling, and cannot lead to meaningful answers.

For well over two decades, Chongbin has used Chinese ink mixed with acrylic gesso to make paintings on sheets of sandalwood paper. He sometimes combines more than one sheets into large, overlapping collage forms that form skewed sequences, as if each segment is a single component of a complex, subtly shifting spine of painterly registers. More often, he uses a single 60 by 40 inch sheet in either a horizontal or vertical format. Sandalwood paper (or Xuan paper) is an ideal surface for painting with inks of different dilution and tonalities. Even though it is perfectly absorbent, it has a distinctive texture and is surprisingly durable owing to the tight, papyrus-like weave of its fibers. From the standpoint of traditional Asian painting, it is the perfect surface to capture the “bone method” of the master painter’s brush—by some accounts preferable to the rarer and more expensive silk that was favored by the court painters of the Song and Yuan dynasties. That much said, it is also important to note Chongbin gives only minimal emphasis to the use of the brush, preferring instead to direct the flow of paint with other tools and methods, many of which are more akin to the processes of American color field painters such as Morris Louis and Helen Frankenthaler, or Korean *Tansaekhwa* painters such as Kim Whanki and Kwon Young Woo.

Because the inks that Chongbin uses have the consistency of water, they infuse the thicker gesso with unpredictable interactions that are later fossilized into fractal indices when the painting dries. These seemingly random index-shapes sometimes take on the aspects of fractal geometry, creating streams of rhizomorphic form that might resemble nerve ganglia or the branched alveoli of lung tissue. This effect is most pronounced in darker works such as *Shaped Reflection* or *Descend From Light*, which tend to be vertically formatted and often folded and/or pleated surfaces. Often times, these works feature suggest some kind of animating energy source located just beyond the top or side of the works’ compositions, indicated by sets of radiating diagonal lines moving toward the work’s center. In other cases, such as the 2015 work titled *Crystalline No. 3*, the white gesso dominates the images.

Works such as this tend to be either square or horizontally formatted, and they sport softer more indistinct edges owing to a more liberal use of collaging layers of paper and gesso. This gives them a more lyrical and comforting demeanor than the one that emerges from the darker, vertically formatted works. But whether or not the white is given primary emphasis, it always seems especially phosphorescent to the viewer's eye, looking rather like the bioluminescent foam of cresting sea waves. Even when the black ink is given the greater emphasis, the white still bespeaks a magical radiance, sometimes looking like swarms of fireflies congregating in a moonless night.

There is more at stake in the diametrical mirroring of these two series than a simple contrast of light and dark, which in itself can be said to echo the yin and yang energies of the cosmos. It also bespeaks the formal distinctions that we might note when comparing the delicate and evanescent tradition of the southern Song tradition from the more dramatic and austere approaches favored by the painters of the northern Song and Yuan dynasties. Differences of geography and climate might account for this distinction, but one thing that remains constant is the recognition that painting is a practice intimately linked to the conjuring of the dragon energies that inhabit the forms of the world. This point is also at the core of Chongbin's work, even though it travels an abstract path by means that redefine the crucial role formerly played by brush. His own brand of geomancy updates those of the ancient painters by taking into account some of the things that we have learned from modern science, one of those being that gravity itself is now known to be a fluctuation of waves and another being that the tectonic forces of the earth are indeed in a state of perpetual and unpredictable motion. The paint itself tells us that this is true, and Chongbin does a masterful job in facilitating this telling.

During the past year, Chongbin has turned his attention to video production so that he might animate digitized images of fluidity with editing techniques that are in themselves fluid insofar as they feature subtle fades, soft wipes and ghosted overlays of photographic captures of flowing liquids. Early last year, he collaborated with the San Francisco-based video production company Obscura Digital to create *Chimeric Landscape*, a 16-minute image sequence set up as an installation. This work was featured in a collateral exhibition held during the 55<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennial, curated by Maya Kovskaya at the Palazzo Bembo. In a darkened room, the viewer witnesses slow fades of undulate water streaming over and across submerged barriers juxtaposed with stationary shots of ink of various viscosities slowly spreading through paper and fabric, followed by what seems to be another sequence interlocked diagram intended to approximate the wave rhythms previously pictured. There are many ways of interpreting this mesmerizing work, but the one that I keep coming back to is the way that it functions as a poetic exegesis designed to provide elaboration upon the way a viewer might experience the paintings. Once one has seen *Chimeric Landscape*, it cannot be unseen; it haunts the viewer's mind as he or she tries to gain perceptual footing in the world of the paintings. And once so haunted, the mind finds it easier to be properly immersed in their unique address to the problem of giving visibility to invisible geomantic energies.