



THE INK
ART OF
CHINA

M I C H A E L
GOEDHUIS

The Ink Art of China

水墨中國

M I C H A E L
GOEDHUIS

The Ink Art of China

CHINESE INK ARTISTS are profoundly relevant to contemporary Chinese society but until recently have been largely neglected by curators and critics alike, with prices therefore also undervalued.

They are important as representing the link between China's great past and the galloping pace towards her future. Their work incorporates a deep understanding of classical Chinese culture, which they believe to be essential in their quest to create a new pictorial language that expresses the fundamentals of today's world. It is therefore probable that the new generation of collectors in China and the diaspora will look at this area of the art-market as the most significant contemporary manifestation of Chinese civilization.

China is the oldest surviving civilization on earth and Chinese contemporary ink works, from calligraphy and painting to photography and video, express the continuation of this vast past in ways which are meaningful for society today, both in China and the West.

CALLIGRAPHY is the sublime and central achievement of China but it has been almost impossible until recently for westerners to grasp the significance of calligraphy for the Chinese. It has been the foundation-stone of their society since the dawn of civilization. As Simon Leys has written 'it is the most elite of all arts . . . practiced by emperors, aesthetes, monks and poets' throughout history but also ostentatiously alive today in advertisements, cinema posters, restaurants, teahouses, railway stations, temples and on rough peasant village doors and walls.

The original purpose of Chinese script, which goes back c. 3,700 years and appears on tortoise shells and shoulder-blades of oxen, was to forecast all major decisions of state: harvest and hunting, war and peace. Gradually, however, from the latter part of the

Han period (3rd century AD), its original purpose was eclipsed by a growing interest in its aesthetic character and in its role as a conduit for the calligrapher's individual creativity. And from then on it became the most important of all the arts, with painting as its intimate but subservient partner.

Calligraphy is executed in ink on silk or paper, with a brush. In order to master this brush on the absorbent paper, which tolerates no error or correction, the artist has to achieve a high degree of concentration, balance and control. It is these qualities, allied to intuition and intelligence, that make this art, like the other three major arts of China, painting, poetry and music (of the *Qin* or zither) one of interpretation. In this respect the calligrapher can be compared to the pianist who interprets the composer but whose every touch, like every brush-stroke by a great calligrapher, becomes an extension of the interpreter's mind.

Although calligraphy became the pre-eminent and elite art of China, with its masters, critics, connoisseurs and collectors, it has also been practiced for hundreds of years by literally millions of Chinese for whom it is a method for achieving the harmonious integration of mind and body, the key to supreme enlightenment.

But as its high status evolved, it was its indissoluble association with the scholar-gentleman and his mastery of the art that established it as manifesting the core concept of Chinese civilization - harmony - whether it pertains to the structure of society or to the individual's alignment with the rhythms of the universe. And so it became the purpose of civilized man, of the gentleman, to become part of the dynamic rhythm of creation and to contribute to the coherent ordering of society. So this elite of scholars became perhaps the most cultivated elite the world has known . . . intent on practicing the arts of calligraphy, painting, poetry and music in order to realize their own humanity by cultivating and developing the inner life. The rich intellectual and spiritual life of these literati has been captured in many enchanting paintings depicting their gatherings in shaded garden pavilions, drinking wine, composing poetry, practicing and enjoying calligraphy and painting, as well as refining the art of convivial conversation.

PAINTING, together with calligraphy, poetry and music, constitutes one of the four key traditional arts of China and is an extension of the art of calligraphy. It is therefore, like calligraphy, linked to the sacred prestige of the written word. One's first encounter with a Chinese painting will immediately betray its literary nature. Unlike a western painting that hangs on a wall, the Chinese work is mounted in the form of a scroll, which by its nature is related to the world of books. It belongs to the realm of the written word.

A further distinction that has made it difficult for western art lovers to fully appreciate Chinese painting is that the Chinese are simply not interested in transcribing or depicting reality. His objective is rather to 'write the meaning of things' ... to express the idea. Thus the role of the painting is to incorporate the minimum visual codes or clues to inspire its full and invisible fruition in the viewer's imagination.

Again, the Chinese aesthetic is very different to that of the West. The prime purpose for the scholar is the cultivation of an inner life, the ultimate aim of which is to perfect one's character in order to attain the moral stature befitting one's status as a gentleman. Thus the notion of beauty as such is irrelevant, indeed is often considered to be a superficial distraction from the purpose of nourishing the energy of the gentleman in capturing the spirit or essence of nature. In fact the ultimate 'beauty' of a work does not depend on its beauty. It is the result of its inner 'truth' and it is this moral concept that is at the heart of all Chinese aesthetics.

It is important to understand that art for the Chinese is part and parcel of their concept of morality and of how to live one's life and how to order society. And it is the written word (the word in ink) that is the binding agent constituting the continuity of the revered civilization and essential for understanding Chinese society, past and present.

The successors of the GENTLEMAN-SCHOLARS described above are today's ink artists. They are deeply aware of the classical canon and its aesthetic and moral imperatives and have carefully studied the old masters. However, just as Picasso and Cézanne studied Raphael, Poussin, Velázquez and others in order to create their revolutionary pictorial language, so the new literati are doing the same in order to formulate their own revolution for their work to be relevant to, and

meaningful for, the world of today. And revolutionary and culturally subversive it is. More subtle than the contemporary oil painters with their abrasive handling of overtly political themes, the ink painters embody their revolutionary message in works that are not afraid to take account of the past in order to make sense of the present.

Very many different stylistic approaches have therefore evolved over the past 30 years. Works now range from those that at first sight look quite traditional but in fact embody powerful fresh aesthetic initiatives by artists like Liu Dan, Li Xubai, Li Huayi, Yang Yanping and Wang Dongling, via those poised delicately in an intermediate style, such as Lo Ch'ing, Qiu Deshu and Li Jin to those that are unambiguously avant-garde seen in the works of Qiu Zhijie, Gu Wenda, Wei Ligang and others. But all of the best contemporary practitioners have a common purpose ... to create works that do not jettison the great cultural legacy of the past in formulating a language that addresses the intellectual cultural and social issues of today.

It is our view therefore that these few (only 50 or so of international stature) artists are poised to assume a historic relevance as the cultural conduit between China's great past and her future. And as such they are likely to shortly become the target of the new generation of collectors and museums in China and the diaspora who, in their new-found national pride and following the global fashion that only contemporary is cool, will be hungry for contemporary manifestations of their country's enduring civilization.

王
冬
龄

WANG DONGLING

b. 1945, Jiangsu Province

Wang Dongling is one of the most successful and gifted of the modernist calligraphers in China and one of the few who has for many years enjoyed an international reputation. At 17, he was admitted into the Department of Fine Arts at Nanjing Normal University and studied calligraphy. During the Cultural Revolution, Wang survived by writing big-character posters, a job that ironically provided him with an artistic freedom not available at the university. After the Cultural Revolution he attended the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou, where he is currently vice-chair of the Calligraphy Department. Wang began developing a new form of composition that synthesizes traditional Chinese aesthetics with modernist art. Usually there are no decipherable Chinese characters in his works, which have become closer to abstract painting than to calligraphy. Wang Dongling has been enormously influential on the whole development of contemporary calligraphy and ink painting.

Confrontation of Yin and Yang, 2005

Ink on xuan paper
216 × 145 cm (85 × 57 in)





姚
瑞
中

YAO JUI-CHUNG

b. 1969, Taipei, Taiwan

Yao Jui-chung is now recognised as one of the most innovative Chinese artists of his generation. His work runs against the current of much of the mainstream avant-garde in its unabashed delight in producing a visual experience for the viewer that is beautiful as well as intellectually provocative. He is well-known for his works on paper, as well as his versatile experiments in photography, installation, performance, video and sculpture. He is also a curator, art critic and art historian and has been dedicated to evaluating and promoting Taiwanese contemporary art both in Taiwan and internationally. He graduated from Taipei National University of the Arts and continues to teach at the University. He also represented Taiwan at the Venice Biennale in 1997.

Good Times: Forest Path, 2015

Ink and gold leaf on paper
200 × 80 cm (78¾ × 31½ in)

曾
小
俊

ZENG XIAOJUN

b. 1954, Beijing

Zeng Xiaojun graduated from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1981. He moved to the United States in 1983 and lived for the next fourteen years in Boston, where he exhibited and taught until 1997. Drawing inspiration from the literati landscape painting tradition, especially works by Shen Zhou (1427-1509) and Wen Zhengming (1470-1559) of the Ming period, Zeng extracts rocks and trees from the context of landscape and depicts them as isolated objects. Employing a delicate balance between dry and wet, lines and dots, his meticulously executed paintings remind us of the Chinese intellectuals' fascination with these subjects as embodiments of their own spiritual perseverance in times of difficulty and turbulence. Together with the work of Liu Dan, Zeng Xiaojun's ink paintings are a powerful example of how the high culture of traditional China can be reinvigorated for contemporary society.

*Ancient Wood from Horyu Temple
in Nara, Japan No. 2, 2004*

Ink on xuan paper
182 × 126 cm (71¾ × 49½ in)





邱志杰

QIU ZHIJIE
b. 1969, Zhangzhou, Fujian

Qiu Zhijie is one of the most talented and versatile artists in contemporary China. He studied printmaking at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, Hangzhou, and graduated in 1992. Teaching there now, he is one of the most influential exponents of new media in China. Qiu's often conceptual works come in photography, video, performance, stone-carving, painting, or calligraphy; he is also an influential curator, critic, and teacher. Many of his works deeply explore the nature and meaning of the cultural tradition he has inherited. For *Monument I: Revolutionary Slogans on Economic Issues*, 2007, Qiu utilized one of the most traditional techniques - ink rubbing - to convey slogans exploring public involvement in economic development. The ironic mixture of an ancient method of transmitting texts with contemporary content provokes people to rethink the relationship between tradition and today's society. He was the curator for the 2012 Shanghai Biennale.

Monument 1: Economy Thoughts of Revolutionary Slogans (Set of 16), 2007

Chromogenic prints and ink on paper
Each panel: 95 × 95 cm (37½ × 37½ in)
Set of 16: 381 × 381 cm (16: 150 × 150 in)

魏
立
刚

WEI LIGANG

b. 1964, Datong, Shanxi

Wei Ligang has been at the forefront of contemporary ink painting's development from its beginning, and he was one of the organisers of the June 1999 'Bashu Parade' exhibition. Wei studied mathematics at the Nankai University in Tianjin and he became the president of the calligraphy society at the university. After graduating in 1985, Wei was assigned to teach mathematics at the Teachers' Training School in the industrial city of Taiyuan, but he succeeded in persuading the school to allow him to teach calligraphy in 1988. His training in mathematics has contributed to his abstract form of calligraphy. Wei Ligang constantly deconstructs and re-forms the characters in his paintings while hinting at traditional script-forms (such as formal, running, or 'grass' script), thus declaring his deep roots in Chinese culture. His works were included in the pioneering exhibition organized by Gordon Barrass at the British Museum in 2002.

Peacock: Rose Red, 2013

Ink, acrylic and lacquer on paper
180 × 96 cm (71 × 38 in)





诗 蓝

LI CHEVALIER

b. 1961, Beijing

Aged 15, Li Chevalier, a gifted vocalist, joined the Opera Ensemble of the Chinese People's Liberation Army for five years. She later joined an intellectual movement centred on humanist ideas that were notorious in China at the time, but were dissolved due to the Anti Spiritual Pollution Campaign. Chevalier then left for Paris in 1984 to study Philosophy at the Sorbonne for which she received a postgraduate degree in 1990 after doing her undergraduate studies at Sciences Politiques. She subsequently studied art in various European capitals including Paris and Florence, receiving her last diploma from Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design in London after which she was selected for the Summer Exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts in London in 2007. Chevalier continues to exploit her musical background in major installations, most recently in Siena at the Santa Maria della Scala. Her work is notable not only for its technical virtuosity and its aesthetic innovations but for the philosophical hinterland on which it rests.

Le Prémontoire du Songe, 2019

Ink on canvas

100 × 100 cm (39¼ × 39¼ in)

李
華
弋

LI HUAYI

b. 1948, Shanghai

Li Huayi began studying as a child and has become one of the most distinguished and internationally recognised Chinese artists of his generation. From a wealthy family, he was able to study both the techniques and styles of Chinese classical paintings as well as European drawing and painting. In 1982, Li moved to San Francisco where he earned an MFA at the San Francisco Art Institute. The expatriate experience reawakened his interest in the classical Chinese tradition of landscape painting and his best-known subjects are misty mountains. Li Huayi creates landscape paintings that are reminiscent of masterworks from the Song period (960-1279). However, instead of planning the composition beforehand, Li applies ink on the paper first, and then allows the composition to take shape in response to the density of the ink. This element of chance brings his work close to late- or post-modernist imperatives, combined with superlative aesthetic similarities to traditional landscape painting.

Landscape, 2010-2011

Ink on paper
180 × 91 cm (71 × 36 in)





Autumn Song, 1996
Ink and colour on *xuan* paper
66 × 133 cm (26¼ × 52½ in)

杨燕屏
YANG YANPING
b. 1934, Nanjing, Jiangsu

Yang Yanping is one of the most distinguished contemporary ink painters from China. She studied architecture at Tsinghua University, where she married one of her painting teachers, Zeng Shanqing. After she graduated in 1958, and a brief spell of teaching factory design, Yang decided to study art at the Oil Painting Department of the Beijing Art Academy. At the same time she studied traditional Chinese painting on her own. In 1986, both Yang and her husband were awarded fellowships from the State University of New York at Stony Brook, and they have

remained in America ever since. Yang is well versed in many traditional styles but has excelled in depicting the lotus flower, a symbol of purity, transience, the fragility of nature, and the potential for regeneration. Yang's ideals of high visual quality and an artistic autonomy allows her to embrace modernism without jettisoning the lessons from the classical Chinese world of high culture. Her recent exhibitions include a major retrospective at The Art Museum of Beijing Fine Art Academy in 2013.



Wondrous Peaks and
Multitudinous Gully, 2012

Ink and colour on paper
49 × 127 cm (19¼ × 50 in)

泰
祥
洲

TAI XIANGZHOU
b. China, 1968

Tai Xiangzhou graduated with his Doctorate from the Art Academy of Qinghua and has studied ink painting under Liu Dan since 2005. In 2006, Tai was profoundly inspired by renowned astrologer, Yi Shitong, and began to explore the view of the universe and spiritual world in Chinese landscape paintings from an astrology perspective. He completed his PhD dissertation entitled, *Phenomena of the Universe – The concepts and structure of Chinese landscape paintings*. This work was highly admired by renowned art

historian, Fang Wen, who recommended the book in the preface and pushed for publishing by the Zhonghua Book Company. Tai began his art training from studying ancient Chinese landscape paintings. He uses the grand, unrefined Yuan style ink strokes to depict the landscape layout of the Five Dynasties and Northern/Southern Song Dynasties, revealing serenity and spirituality in majesty and grandeur. He currently lives and works in Beijing.

谷
文
达

GU WENDA

b. 1955, Shanghai

Gu Wenda moved to New York in 1987, and has become one of the highest-profile members of the Chinese diaspora. Although studying traditional Chinese painting, Gu became one of the leading figures in the New Wave art movement of the mid-1980s, when he utilized the technical skills he acquired in school for his iconoclastic painting and calligraphy projects. *Wonderland* (1986) exemplifies Gu's revolt against the tyranny of the traditional aesthetics of brush and ink (*bimo*) by subverting it. The unconventional composition of the painting has created a spiritual and surreal world, which reflects the mentality of the Chinese society and idealist art of the 1980s, when huge social changes took place. By combining different character components, Gu has invented unreadable characters to investigate the power of the written word. In most of these works, he places these powerfully symbolic pseudo-characters in vast surreal spaces.

Wonderland, 1986

Ink on paper

68 × 99 cm (26¾ × 39 in)





秦
风

QIN FENG

*b. 1961, Xinjiang Uyghur,
Autonomous Region*

Qin Feng is an iconoclastic artist who is actively involved in China's avant-garde art movement. He studied mural painting at the Shandong University of Art and was one of the only two people in Shandong Province who radically experimented with imported styles of contemporary art during that period. From 1996 to 1999, Qin Feng taught at the Berlin University of Art while further exploring the possibilities of synthesizing modernism and the ink-painting tradition. In 1999, he moved to Boston where he currently resides. Before brushing ink on numerous layers of *xuan* paper, Qin often dyes it with tea and coffee as a metaphorical gesture of two cultures blending together. His fluid ink and dynamic brush technique has developed into a style that is related to Abstract Expressionism in its openness to chance and emphasis on gesture. His works are a persuasive manifestation of the vitality of the calligraphic tradition.

West Wind East Water 0604, 2006

Ink, coffee and tea on custom
made silk and cotton paper
190 × 94 cm (74 × 37 in)



Light Through Rising Clouds, 2018

Ink and colour on paper
107 × 232 cm (42¼ × 91¼ in)

官志
GUAN ZHI
b. China, 1979

Guan Zhi initially followed the traditional path of gifted students by attending the elite school of Renmin University. He later completed his MBA at Jinan University. Introduced to calligraphy and ink painting as a child, he started to become a professional artist in China and subsequently in the USA having acquired the EB-1A visa denoting extraordinary ability. He has since then made a name for himself on the West Coast and with The Spencer Museum of Art (University of Kansas) while exposed to, and

interested in, Western Modernism. His primary aesthetic commitment is to transforming the classical canon of Chinese ink painting into works which are meaningful to both Chinese society and the west today. Together with the painting of Liu Dan, Li Huayi and Zeng Xiaojun, Guan Zhi's work represents a powerful example of how the high culture of traditional China can be reinvigorated for contemporary society.

王
天
德

WANG TIANDE

b. 1960, Shanghai

Wang Tiande is one of the most innovative calligraphers in China: he recently created calligraphic works by the planting of new grass or by having sheep eat grass away in the shape of characters. A graduate of the Chinese Painting Department at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in 1988, he is now dean and professor at the Art and Design Department at Fudan University in Shanghai. Wang's art is a serious meditation on the precarious relation between permanence and fleeting efflorescence, between the material and the immaterial, between past and present, between tradition and contemporaneity. He started to create his *Digital* series when he was on an artist's residency in Paris in 2002. His direct encounter with contemporary art, especially conceptual art, in Paris not only inspired him to new approaches in his own work but also further convinced him of his love for the language of ink.

Digital – No09-MH81, 2009

Ink on paper with burn marks

Small panel: 62 × 21.5 cm (24½ × 8½ in)

Large panel: 181 × 61.5 cm (71¼ × 24¾ in)





Fissuring – Wispy Sunlight Shines In, 2010
Ink and acrylic on paper and canvas
74 × 179 cm (29 × 70½ in)

仇
德
树
QIU DESHU
b. 1948, Shanghai

Qiu Deshu, one of the few Chinese artists to have received international recognition since the 1980s, studied traditional ink painting and seal carving when he was a child. However, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution interrupted his career in art, and he was sent to work at a plastics factory. In the late 1970s, Qiu picked up ink painting again and co-founded the Grass Painting Society (*Caocao huashe*), one of China's first experimental art groups of

the post-Mao period. In the early 1980s, he developed his signature style of works called 'fissuring' (*liebian*). This is a metaphor for the artist's life and artistic career, both of which have experienced dramatic disruptions and setbacks. In these works, he applies vivid colours to *xuan* paper, which he tears up; Qiu mounts the fragments to a base layer, often leaving space between, to create a pictorial field with the 'cracks' that he feels are symbolic of life's journey.

李
虚
白

LI XUBAI

b. 1940, Fuzhou, Fujian

Li moved to Hong Kong in 1979, where he has been the editor for art magazines such as *The World of Collectors* and *Dragon Roots Art Magazine* and went to Canada in 1996, where he now lives. Although he first taught himself western-derived painting, Li began to study Chinese classical literature, poetry, and landscape painting in the 1960s. His paintings are constructions of landscape elements without a specific relationship to any one geographical site. Li Xubai maintains his connection with the contemporary world by creating a seemingly flat pictorial space and a pixilated effect reminiscent of digital media. By choosing to paint in a classically derived style, Li Xubai asserts his cultural identity while working in a foreign land. The poems he inscribes on his paintings in traditional literatus fashion usually mention his foreign residence, echoing numerous inscriptions by painterly predecessors who wistfully invoked their own political exile.

*Mountain Home of
Ancient People, 2009*

Ink and light colour on paper
246 × 123 cm (96¾ × 48½ in)





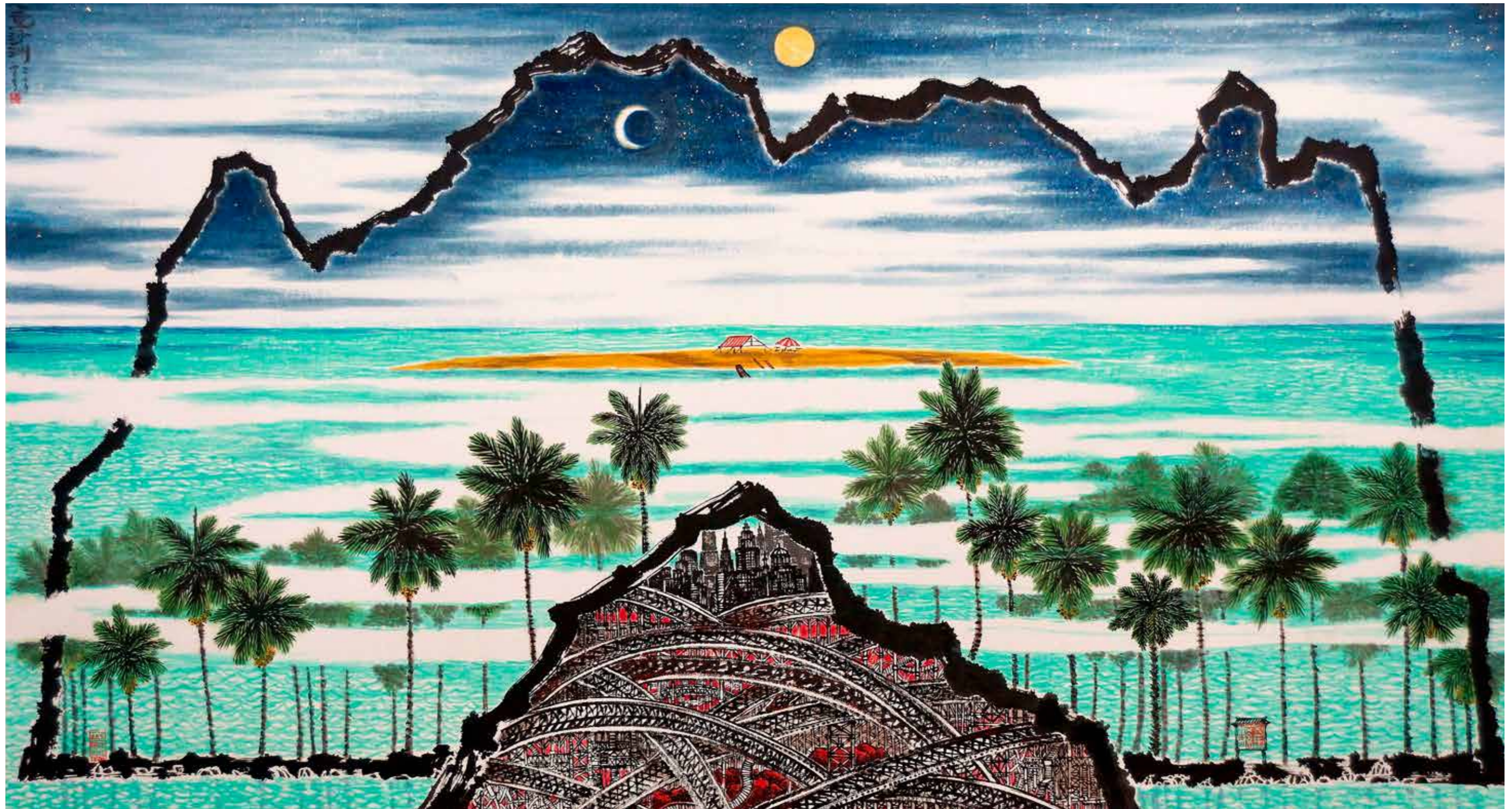
李津

LI JIN
b. 1958, Tianjin

Li Jin is one of the best-known and most unorthodox artists in the so-called New Literati group of ink painters. Before his study in the Painting Department at the Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts, where he now teaches, Li studied dyeing and weaving at the Tianjin Academy of Arts and Crafts, which partly explains his mastery of pattern and colour. Li Jin gradually formed his uniquely playful style in the early 1990s, and is now famous for his seductive depictions of the good life. In contrast to the formality and stereotyped subjects of historical literati painting – often derived from famous texts, pictures by earlier masters, or both – food and wine and the simple things in today's life are Li's subject matter. The 'Falstaffian' figure that appears repeatedly in his work is modelled on himself, and the flirtatious, enticing young women are the artist's ideal of female beauty.

Dancing Girl, 2007

Ink and colour on *xuan* paper
95 × 180 cm (37½ × 71 in)



Crossing the Bar of the Soul, 2017

Colour and colour on paper
96 × 189 cm (37¼ × 74½ in)

罗青

LO CH'ING
b. 1948, Qingdao, Shandong

Lo Ch'ing is a poet, painter, and calligrapher. He moved to Taiwan in 1949. At an early age, Lo learned classical ink painting of the court tradition. Subsequently, he studied in the English Department of Fu Jen University, and received an M.A. degree in Comparative Literature from the University of Washington, Seattle, in 1974. He has been both a professor of literature and a professor of fine arts in universities in Taiwan, the United States, the United Kingdom, Prague,

and mainland China. His poems have been published and translated into many languages, and Lo Ch'ing is regarded as one of the pioneers of post-modern poetry in Taiwan. He has also been a major innovator in ink painting, for which he has created a new visual vocabulary that deconstructs the classical forms of Chinese landscape by introducing into his compositions abstract and geometric elements, as well as unexpected contemporary motifs.

©Michael Goedhuis, 2019. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form whatsoever without the prior permission of the publisher.

All images reproduced with permission

DESIGN: Ornan Rotem

PRINT AND BINDING: Zone Graphics, Paddock Wood

MICHAEL GOEDHUIS PUBLISHING

LONDON 2019


61 Cadogan Square

London SW1X 0HZ

T +44 (0) 20 7823 1395

london@michaelgoedhuis.com

www.michaelgoedhuis.com

 [@michaelgoedhuisgallery](https://www.instagram.com/michaelgoedhuisgallery)