ALŽBETA SZOMOLAIIOVÁ ►►

Slovak Academy of Sciences

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2270-5154>

The Importance of Ink in Chinese Contemporary Art

[book review *Breaking the Ink: Abstract Ink Art in Mainland China*]

Важность чернил в современном китайском искусстве

[рецензия книги *Breaking the Ink: Abstract Ink Art in Mainland China*]

What does ink art mean in the era of Chinese contemporary art? It is a question that many academics pondered. *Breaking the Ink: Abstract Ink Art in Mainland China* is the first major comprehensive study which is committed to the exploration of the entire spectrum of contemporary ink art with abstract features in Mainland China. Since the late 1970s, Chinese fine art attracted considerable attention to art theoreticians. China brings a large number of contemporary artists to take part in the most anticipated international art exhibitions as the Venice Biennale, where participants reflect a culture as a form of power. Contemporary art tends to blend social and political comments with art and the majority of works try to send a message, mostly one of progress. Chinese artists reveal the maturity and diversity of contemporary art in China through their work. Despite a large number of contemporary styles, Western critics focus largely on Chinese figural art, such as Political Pop, Cynical Realism, thus – Ink Art, which is still considered ancient art, is shifted from the center of attention.

Breaking the Ink: Abstract Ink Art in Mainland China provides various theoretical and historical views on abstract art and describes in detail the changing cultural atmosphere in Mainland China from the hostile environment in

1980's to its current acceptance and appreciation. The author discusses the use of brushes and calligraphic brush strokes or their rejection, as well as the position of Chinese ink painting on traditional rice paper as a representation of Chinese cultural identity. In addition to ink painting, the author also mentions installations and several executive works of art, thus broadening the definition of works of art.

The author of the book traces the development of ink art in Mainland China since the 1970s, and how ink innovators drew on the historic canon of traditional ink art while taking elements from the avant-garde movements to create a unique aesthetic that breaking from the past. Daniela Zhang Cziráková, PhD., who completed numerous study and research stays at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, became part of the Chinese art community in Beijing. Being an artist herself, she gives us a glimpse not only through the eyes of an academic but also an artist who was part of the '85 New Wave movement in the 1990s and continues to maintain very good and close relationships with leading contemporary Chinese ink art artists. The book is based on her previous research, such as, "Abstrakcia ako dôležitá súčasť čínskej experimentálnej maľby tušom [Abstraction as an important Part of Chinese Experimental Ink and Washes Painting]" (Zhang Cziráková, 2014a), "Modern Tendencies in Contemporary Ink and Wash Painting in Mainland China since New Wave 85 up to Present" (Zhang Cziráková, 2017).

The book is organized thematically into five main parts. The first chapter (*Sources and Inspirations for the Development of Abstract Ink Painting in Mainland China in Chinese Art History*) is devoted to the historical-theoretical part of abstract art in China. Although Chinese abstract art emerged under the influence of Western modern avant-garde trends, the author emphasizes that Chinese art was initially closer to subjective self-expression than realistic depiction. The chapter also discusses authorial self-expression and places spiritual consonance over formal likeness. The Chinese art theory and its relation to the contemporary abstract art is described in more details in "Theoretical Sources for Abstract Painting in the Ancient Chinese Art Theory before the Tang Dynasty" (Zhang Cziráková, 2015), as well as in "Subjektivita a semiabstraktné prvky v starej čínskej maľbe tušom [Subjectivity and Semi-abstract features in Chinese Ancient Ink Painting]" (Zhang

Cziráková, 2010b). In the following chapter *Inspiration from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan*, the author offers an overview of avant-garde art in Hong Kong and Taiwan in the 1960s and 1970s, which significantly influenced the later development of contemporary ink painting in mainland China. It is no coincidence that many of these pioneering artists lived in Hong Kong. When Mao Zedong launched the Cultural Revolution in 1966, traditional ink art was banned except art that served the Communists. Hong Kong has offered ink artists a haven for experimentation. They modernized an ancient art form with aesthetics, oriented towards ancient Chinese philosophy and Western modernism, and created abstractions filled with Buddhist principles and painted with respect for complex concepts of traditional ink art in the field of manuscript and composition. Taiwan also offered an extraordinary living space for its movements, especially after the emergence of the Cultural Revolution. Since then, ink art became an excitingly experimental art form across the region. The situation in Taiwan and Hong Kong is described in the author's article *Abstraktná maľba na Taiwane a v Hongkongu v šesťdesiatych až osemdesiatych rokoch dvadsiateho storočia* [Abstract Painting in Taiwan and Hong Kong during 1960s – 1980s] (Zhang Cziráková, 2010a). After the death of Mao, mainland Chinese artists rediscovered ink art with their contemporary interpretations. The author in this chapter illustrates also Japanese avant-garde calligraphy, which influenced Western Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s, as well as Chinese painting after 1980. Chapter - *Chinese Ink Art from Contemporary to Abstract* provides us with the historical and cultural development of contemporary ink painting after the decline of the Cultural Revolution and acquaints us with the influential avant-garde movement '85 New Wave, which gave birth to the first abstract Ink paintings in Mainland China. In the fourth chapter of the book *The Movement of Experimental Ink and Washing and its Relation to Abstract Ink Art*, the author analyzes the Movement of Experimental Ink and Washing characterized by a strong inclination to abstraction, that influenced the development of abstract art as a whole. The work of a founder of the movement is described in "Crossing Ink River. Zhang Yu and his Contribution to the Movement of Experimental Ink and Wash Painting" (Zhang Cziráková, 2016). The *Abstract Ink Painting in China Beyond and After the Movement of Experimental Ink and Wash* examines a selection of Chinese abstract artists non-members of

the Movement of Experimental Ink and Wash. The chapter deals with the demise of the movement and the rise of new movements such as Abstract Calligraphy also called False Calligraphy, Maximalism, Yi Pai, and the most recent Neo-modernism and compares the subtle differences between them. For more information about Chinese abstract ink art closely linked with the calligraphy see “Writing without Words: An Influence of the Chinese Calligraphy on the Contemporary Ink Painting in the Mainland China.” (Zhang Cziráková, 2014b). The final chapter under the title *Conclusion. Visions, Hopes, and Challenges for Abstract Ink Painting in China* summarizes the author’s conclusions, outlined obstacles that artists face today and the prospects for further development of abstract painting under the changing socio-economic conditions.

Breaking the Ink: Abstract Ink Art in Mainland China examines the creative output of a large selection of Chinese artists and their artworks. In addition to prominent leading artists who are deeply committed to abstract ink art, such as Wang Chuan or Zhang Yu, the author introduced artists who emerged in the last decade. Rather than giving an exhaustive list of artists, the author is focusing on the abstract ink art from a more comprehensive perspective, including rather the dynamics of the whole process. The book showcases also the works of several artists who stretched the boundaries of ink art for a relatively short time before they returned to more traditional genres or switched into different avant-garde styles, as is Pop Art or even Political Pop. The book is offering substantial visual photographic sources, which is an organic part of the book. The photographs of the artworks are coming directly from the artists and the gallerists and many of them are presented for the first time in the international context. Although all of the artists have challenged, subverted, or otherwise transformed their sources through new modes of expression, Ink Art seeks to demonstrate that China’s ancient pattern of seeking cultural renewal through the reinterpretation of past models remains a viable creative path.

Breaking the Ink: Abstract Ink Art in Mainland China offers a whole new perspective on the Chinese art of recent decades, and although it focuses on abstract art, it deepens knowledge about abstraction in mainland China in general. The main contribution of the publication is the originality of the topic and the extensive use of the primary sources. The author’s erudition in

the selection of artists is also significant. Unlike other authors who focus on Chinese modern and contemporary art, such as Michael Sullivan, Wu Hong, Gao Minglu, and others, *Breaking the Ink* focuses exclusively on abstract ink art. This Book may also be appreciated from the perspective of global art. Examining ink art through the author lens, layers of meaning and cultural significance that might otherwise go unnoticed are revealed. Ultimately author's points of view contribute to a more enriched understanding of these artists' creative processes.

MGR. ALŽBETA SZOMOLAI OVÁ, PHD

Institute of History
Slovak Academy of Sciences
Klemensova 19, 814 99 Bratislava, Slovakia
alzbeta_szomolaiova@yahoo.co.uk

Bibliography

- Zhang Cziráková, D. (2010a). Abstraktná maľba na Taiwane a v Hongkongu v šesťdesiatych až osemdesiatych rokoch dvadsiateho storočia [Abstract Painting in Taiwan and Hong Kong during 1960s–1980s]. *Sborník z Česko-slovenské sinologické conference [Almanac from Czech/Slovak Sinologic Conference]*. Olomouc: FF Univerzita Palackého.
- Zhang Cziráková, D. (2010b). Subjektivita a semiabstraktné prvky v starej čínskej malbe tušom [Subjectivity and Semi-abstract features in Chinese Ancient Ink Painting]. *Anthropologia Integra*, 1(2), pp. 71–90.
- Zhang Cziráková, D. (2014a). Abstrakcia ako dôležitá súčasť čínskej experimentálnej maľby tušom [Abstraction as an important Part of Chinese Experimental Ink and Washes Painting]. In: M. Slobodník, L. Gajdoš (eds.). *Miscellanea Asiae Orientalis Slovaca*. Bratislava: Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave, Katedra východoázijských štúdií, FFUK, pp. 59–89.
- Zhang Cziráková, D. (2014b). Writing without Words: An Influence of the Chinese Calligraphy on the Contemporary Ink Painting in the Mainland China. *Journal of Sino-Western Communications*, VI(1), pp. 102–116.
- Zhang Cziráková, D. (2015). Theoretical Sources for Abstract Painting in the Ancient Chinese Art Theory before the Tang Dynasty. *Journal of Sino-Western Communications*, VII(1), pp. 176–187.
- Zhang Cziráková, D. (2016). Crossing Ink River. Zhang Yu and his Contribution to the Movement of Experimental Ink and Wash Painting. In: A. Rácová, M. Bucková (eds.). *Studia orientalia Victori Krupa dedicata*. Bratislava: SAP, pp. 259–217.

Zhang Cziráková, D. (2017). Modern Tendencies in Contemporary Ink and Wash Painting in Mainland China since New Wave 85 up to Present. *Studia orientalia Slovaca*, 16(1), pp. 143–174.

Zhang Cziráková, D. (2020). *Breaking the Ink: Abstract Ink Art in Mainland China*. Veda: Publishing House of the SAS.