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# Jizi: A Bridge Between Chinese Traditional Art and the Present

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## **Jizi: A bridge Between Chinese Traditional Art and The Present**

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**Today, the faces of Chinese contemporary art appear in many forms. Perhaps most familiar in Western circles at this moment are the theatrical caricatures of the Buddha's smile as in the works of Yue Mnjun which first emerged in the 1990s, and the political renderings of Mao Zedong, for example Dong Xiwen's painting "Mao Declaring the People's Republic from Tiananmen" (revised ca. 1980). Mnjun's painting stretches beyond the roots of tradition in search of a new artistic identity. His work leaves few traces to the literati of traditional Chinese art. The familiar images of Mao emerged during his lifetime and beyond, extending beyond the geographic and cultural boundaries of China into the West thru Andy Warhol's famous rendering of "Mao," 1972,1973, mark his unique role in the political and social evolution of mid-twentieth century China . Again, the many different artists' renderings of Mao bear little relationship to traditional Chinese art, as they are grounded mainly in Chinese Social Realism or some form of Pop Art, with the possibility of connections to Chinese folk art traditions.**

**Jizi or Yunshan Jizi, (1942-) belongs to a very different aspect of Chinese contemporary art that is fermenting quietly alongside other more flamboyant western-driven approaches to art. He and others who chose to work in the medium of ink brush paintings are engaged in a search for meaningful connections between traditional philosophical and artistic means and the present day experience. This does not mean simply painting in the manner of previous masters. Rather Jizi's paintings achieve their own sense of originality through experimentation with renderings of pictorial space, varied ink colorations, and brush strokes . His medium is brush and ink painting, or some variation in the form of constructions.**

**I first became acquainted with Jizi's paintings during a visit to his studio in November, 2007 during a visit to Beijing to lecture at Beijing International University, the Central Academy of Fine Art , Beijing University, and the China Academy of Social Sciences. In my first impressions of jizi's paintings I experienced a powerful sense of visual energy, driven by the formal rigor and expressive force of the masterful hand of a gifted artist. Dark inks carefully layered to evoke spatial patterns marked by energized shapes, subtle tones of black to gray to white, and with occasional daubs of reds, blues giving a sense of visual and psychological order to the painting surfaces. Most impressive in his paintings is the extraordinary depth of space with multiple layers of intensity. The images can only be read imaginatively, as they are not representational works based on any real world events or objects, but products of the imagination, intended to activate in turn the imagination of the viewers.**

**The ink brush paintings of Jizi are thus mainly based on inner feelings or ideas rather than observations of actual scenes of nature, as is the case with traditional Chinese landscape art. His images evoke visual sensations that function to transfer the rhythmic patterns endowed in the painting's surfaces to the mind of the viewer. In the course of contemplating these works it is possible to imagine the free forms as wind driven clouds, mountains, streams of flowing water, or the clashing of rock formations that might generate powerful disruptions of the underworld. However, it is not out of the question to find in his compositions occasional symbolic architectural forms, or even symbolic animal figures placed**

quixotically in the midst of swirling abstract forms . One can even imagine the eye of a monster figure in some of the works. However, the main point is to experience the works as visual meditations with deeply spiritual and intellectual connotations grounded most likely in a philosophical understanding of Taoism.

Like many other artists of his generation, Jizi had to work through the challenges of the Cultural Revolution, which deprived him of the opportunity for a formal education in art. His education in art was acquired by persistence toward mastery of the brush and ink medium through unrelenting practice. His practice was augmented by diligent self-study, reading books on art, consulting with other artists, and observing master paintings in the museums and galleries of Beijing. All of this while working at various jobs including carpentry and designing art- craft works. Since the 1980s, he has devoted full time to his art.

Where do the paintings of Jizi fit into the larger picture of contemporary Chinese art? He belongs to a mainstream movement in Chinese contemporary art concerned with what constitutes Chinese painting, and ultimately, what constitutes contemporary ink painting. (Pi Daojian) The debate takes place in reference to both traditional ideas with respect to this medium and the influences of modern theories of abstraction and expression. This tradition persists despite the fact that the material medium of ink painting itself is quite, modest when compared with the complex formats of the media arts of today. Essentially, "Ink painting in a narrow sense means literally painting with ink and brush, but in a broader sense it means black on white, painting of monochromatic palette." (G. Y. Wu ) Its success depends almost entirely on the philosophical and aesthetic understanding and skill possessed by the individual artist. These artists who choose to practice ink brush painting share a desire to create art that is grounded in the cultural traditions of China, while establishing meaningful symbols for life in the new China of today.

The importance of brush and ink paintings in Chinese contemporary art is attested to by the fact that leading artists of today are involved in the practice. Among these are Wenda Gu and Xu Bing. Wenda Gu co-authored a book on Chinese Ink Painting in the Twenty-first Century published by Shanghai Fine Arts Press. Both artists have participated in exhibitions featuring ink and brush paintings.

The current interest has generated a series of exhibitions devoted to contemporary ink and brush painting. These efforts to extend the artistic possibilities for brush and ink into contemporary art have been documented in numerous recent exhibitions including the exhibition, "Brush and Ink: the Chinese Art of Writing," at the Metropolitan Museum of art in New York (2007), "Contemporary Art in Evolution" organized by BJMOCA, Beijing, with venues at Harvard University (2008, 2009) in the USA, and "Ink Not Ink," organized by the Shenzhen Art Museum and presented at Drexel University in Philadelphia, USA in 2009. Numerous exhibitions on this subject have taken place in China and elsewhere. The exhibition of Jizi's brush ink paintings opening in Beijing's 798 Art Space (June 2009) joins the on-going discourse to establish the importance of brush and ink painting in the contemporary art world of China.