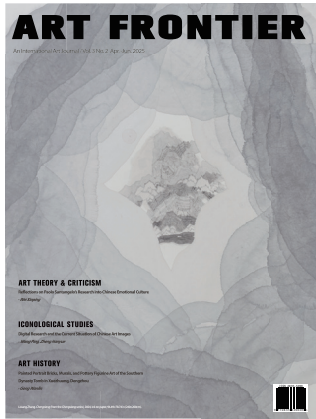




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Between Ink and Illumination: Lixiang Zhang's Chengxiang in a Global Horizon

Jingwei Zeng

Abstract

This paper takes Zhang Lixiang's *Chengxiang* series as a case study, aiming to explain how contemporary Chinese ink painting redefines the concept of abstraction in the context of global modernism. Through the comparative dialogue with Mark Roscoe and Noguchi Yong, this paper argues that Zhang Lixiang's art transcends the division of binary oppositions such as "East and West", "tradition and modernity," "materiality and transcendence." This study draws on Zong Bing's theory of *chenghuai weixiang*, and puts Zhang Lixiang's artistic practice into a continuum that integrates Taoist-Buddhist meditation and modern abstract art. When Roscoe's color gamut painting expresses existentialist sublimity, and Noguchi Yong's sculptures transform the natural landscape into spiritual space, Zhang Lixiang's ink painting internalizes these two artistic impulses-transforming the dialectical relationship between "space and form" into a meditative enlightenment field. His works show that abstract art is not the exclusive field of Western modernism, but a shared visual language. Through this language, multicultural tradition can pursue spiritual clarity and inner peace.

Key Words: Lixiang Zhang, Ye Kouyong-Global Ink Painting, Art*Chengxiang*

Introduction

How contemporary Chinese ink painting should be positioned in the history of world art has long been a core issue and controversial. Over the past two decades, cultural hybridity has become a prominent feature of Asian artistic experience in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. A typical example is the 2013 exhibition "Ink Art: Contemporary China - Past is Present" by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (December 11, 2013 - April 6, 2014). As the introduction of the exhibition says: "The works on display in this exhibition should be best understood as an integral part of the continuum of Chinese traditional culture; these works can also be appreciated

from the perspective of global art, but if they are examined through the prism of the Chinese historical art paradigm, they can reveal the multiple meanings and cultural connotations that would otherwise be ignored.”¹

This curatorial statement itself reveals the dual dilemma faced by contemporary ink painting: it is either absorbed into the narrative of Western abstract art and becomes a “belated modernism”; it is either imprisoned in the framework of cultural heritage and reduced to a re-presentation of tradition. Under this tension, Li Xiangzhang (born in 1971) and his *Chengxiang* (Fig.1) series of works are particularly eye-catching - this series does not simply copy the past, nor does it merely imitate the West, but ponders the two.

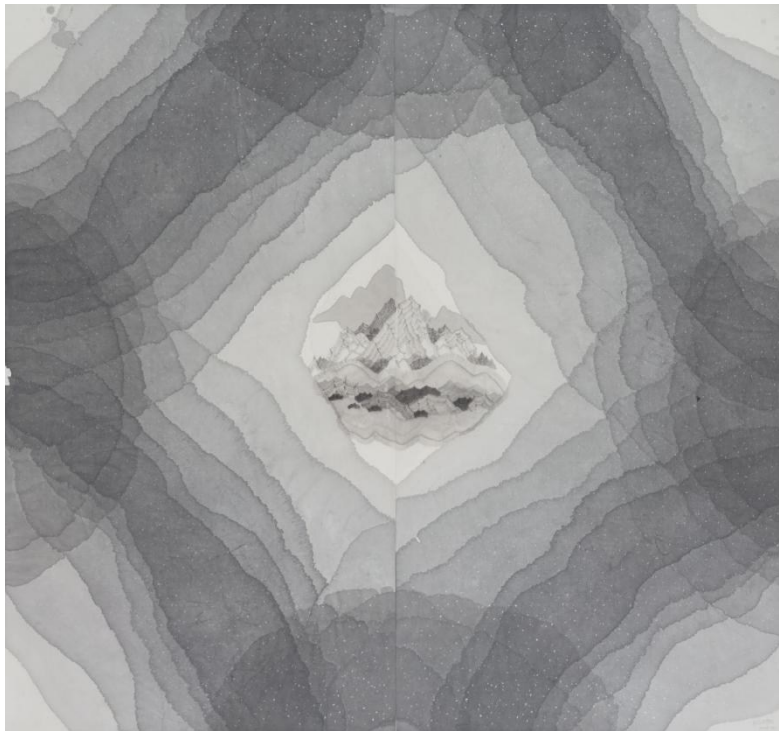


Figure 1. Lixiang Zhang. *Chengxiang* series. Painting, Ink on paper, 70.87×76.38in (180×194cm), 2024.

At the same time, the power of tradition and the vitality of contemporary art are always inseparable. As Robert Thorpe and Richard Winograd pointed out: “The struggle of many contemporary artists in the face of the heavy burden of tradition reveals the core position of this issue in the overall history of Chinese art in the twentieth century.”² Zhang’s works are characterized by quiet vast space, restrained brushwork and meditative atmosphere. These works are often described as containing the characteristics of “ethereal and clear” - which is the essence of Chinese tradition.

His creation is rooted in the traditional material perception, neither rigidly adhere to the concrete performance, nor fall into the obvious conceptualism. On the contrary, Zhang in the “*Chengxiang*” series of works highlights what he calls “the clarity of images beyond images” -a threshold state in which form melts into existence.

The term “incense ink” refers to an artistic vision shaped by cultivation, clarity, and disciplined exploration through delicate perception and the evolving expressiveness of ink. As Jia Tingfeng explained: *Chengxiang* means that through continuous artistic accomplishment and practice, it constantly reveals the essence of art and the continuous process of the true state of things. It emphasizes that while studying the most essential tradition of Chinese art, it is also necessary to study the outstanding works in the world art, reinterpret the Chinese art tradition with innovative contemporary forms, and continue to expand the boundary of artistic understanding. This interpretation not only gives Zhang’s artistic vision its iconic name, but also provides a theoretical basis for connecting artistic criticism and creative practice. By integrating Jia Tingfeng’s philosophical insights into his own meditation methodology, Zhang transformed “Cheng Xiang Ink” into an exploration with both visual and moral pursuits - this exploration aims to pursue clarity through continuous refinement and spiritual awakening.

This aesthetic view raises a number of key issues: whether this is an abstract art in the sense of Western modernism, or a continuation of the traditional Chinese literati philosophy? How should we interpret Zhang Chengxiang’s paintings without simply subsuming them into the two extremes of global modernity or national tradition? These questions reveal a broader concern in the global field of abstract art - that is, to seek a visual language that is both common and diverse to express internality, spirituality and universality.

This paper discusses the above issues by conducting a dialogue between Zhang and two seemingly different artists, Mark Roscoe (1903-1970), a leading figure in abstract expressionism, and Isam Noguchi (1904-1988), a Japanese-American sculptor and designer. At first glance, Roscoe and Noguchi’s field seems to be very different - the former focuses on painting, the latter is committed to sculpture; the

former is active in the gallery space, while the latter is in the natural landscape-However, their creations have deeply explored the construction of perceptual phenomenology, meditation environment, and the mediating relationship between material minimalism and spiritual tension. This study juxtaposes Roscoe's "abstract sublime" with Noguchi's spatial poetics (from his early work "Play Mountain" to the sacred landscape in "Kukaniloko"), and places Zhang's *Chengxiang* series of paintings at the intersection of color and space, emotion and tranquility, material and mind.

In terms of methodology, this study draws on the research paradigm of comparative aesthetics and global art history. It neither adopts the "diffusionism" model (which regards Zhang's works as a belated echo of Western modernism) nor the "culturalism" model (which confines his artistic creation to the category of "Chinese ink painting"); on the contrary, this study argues that Cheng Xiang is regarded as a participant in a transnational art dialogue - in this dialogue, different abstraction strategies and spatial experience strategies converge on a common inquiry proposition: in the era of global modernity, how can art produce a state of contemplative presence?

This paper is divided into three parts. The first part puts Zhang Daqian's *Chengxiang* series in the context of the ideological and aesthetic inheritance of Chinese landscape painting theory, and traces its philosophical roots - both from Zong Bing's concept of Chengxin taste image and from Zhang Daqian's own creative process; the second part turns to Mark Roscoe to explore how his "color gamut" painting and its interpretation in the "abstract sublime" discourse system reveal Zhang Daqian's use of ink, emptiness and tone gradient; the third part focuses on Noguchi's spatial aesthetics - especially his work "Touring the Mountains" and the spatial scheme designed for Hawaii's San Diego Cukaniloko - focusing on his "minimal intervention" and "meditative space" creative strategies. Through these comparative analyses, this paper positions Zhang Daqian's *Chengxiang* series as a dialogue between image and space, materiality and transcendence. In the end, this paper argues that Li Xiangzhang's *Chengxiang* series should not be regarded as a marginal product

of Chinese or Western art traditions, but should be understood as a unique abstract art model that reimagines painting as sacred space. Through this path, Zhang Daqian expands the tradition of “ink as a medium of reflection” in literati paintings and the pursuit of “sublime” in modernism to a new field full of cross-cultural resonance and spiritual depth.

1. The Artistic Context of Zhang Lixiang’s Chengxiang and Spiritual Luminescence

Zhang Lixiang is currently the president of the School of Fine Arts and Design of Daqing Normal University, and also serves as a professor and graduate tutor. His *Chengxiang* (Fig.2) series of works should be understood as a way of contemporary artistic expression that transcends tradition and integrates modernity. The term *Chengxiang* contains rich philosophical connotations: it echoes the Taoist concept of “Chenghuai guandao”(chenghuai guandao), and is consistent with traditional aesthetic concepts such as “yixiang” and “qiyun”. Zhang Lixiang does not simply continue the creative paradigm of traditional ink painting, but transforms abstract art into a way of spiritual cultivation, injecting a new dimension of meditation into contemporary art.

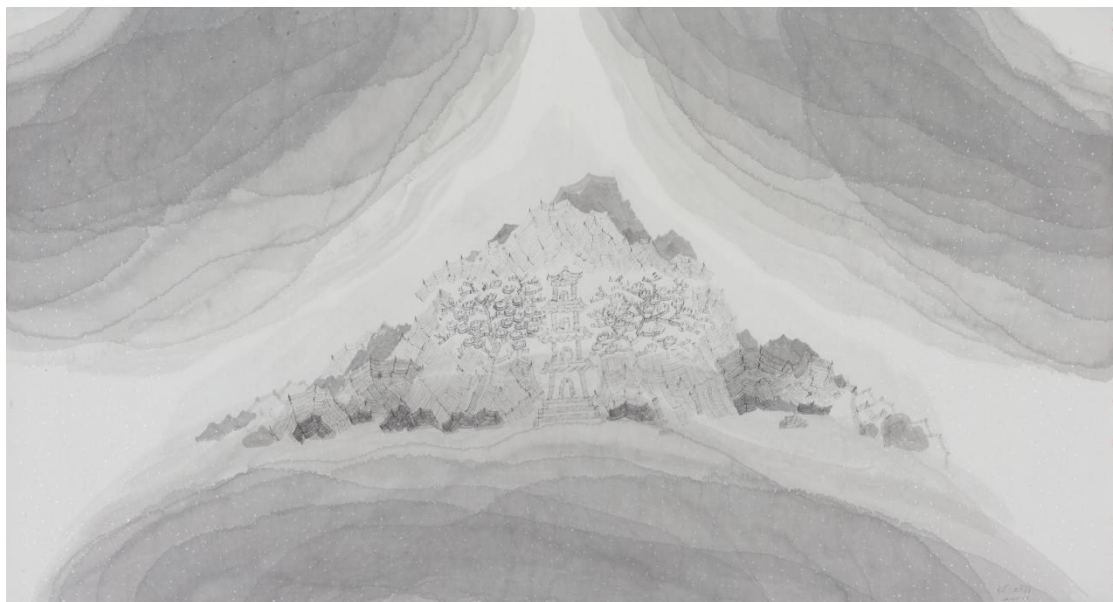


Figure 2. Lixiang Zhang. *Chengxiang* (from the “*Chengxiang*” series). Painting, Ink on paper, 37.80×70.87in (96×180cm), 2024.

The term *Chengxiang* originates from Zong Bing’s (375–443) seminal essay *A*

Preface to the Painting of Landscapes (Hua shanshui xu), which begins with the statement: “The sage encompasses the Dao and responds to things; worthies purify their minds and savor images”³.

The concept of “image” (xiang) originated from Zong Bing’s teacher, the famous Buddhist monk Hui Yuan (334-416). In Huiyuan’s *Inscription for a Buddhist Image*, the word “image” is described in mystical terms.

“Broad is the great image, its patterns mysterious and nameless. When the body’s spirit begins its transformation, it sheds its shadow and leaves its form. Circling in the radiance over the layered precipice, it congeals onto an empty pavilion. In the shade, it is not darkened, and in the dark, light intrudes. Stepping delicately, it molts from its shell, and pays respect to the hundred spirits. Responding in a different mode, its traces vanish and grow dark.”⁴

“廓矣大象。理玄無名。體神入化。落影離形。迴輝層岩。凝映虛亭。在陰不昧。處暗逾明。婉步蟬蛻。朝宗百靈。應不同方。跡絕而冥。”⁵

According to Zong-qi Cai and Stephen Roddy, this “image” is “converting Buddha into an eternal deity or spirit who takes form amidst the myriad things yet also exists in a state that transcends physical form.”⁶ In other words, the visible form becomes a vehicle of the invisible, linking the image of nature and the image of Buddha as manifestations of the same cosmic truth.⁷

In the fourth section of *A Preface to the Painting of Landscapes*, Zong Bing elaborates on this higher dimension of transcendence—namely, “the transcendence of the spirit to find the truth.” He writes:

“The [transcendent] principle in landscape is what we respond to with the eye and meet with the mind. If a painting has deftly achieved correspondence with a landscape, we can engage it with eye and mind in the same fashion. Through such a response, one communes with the spirit, achieves a transcendence of one’s own spirit, and attains the [absolute] principle. Even though one can again search for the invisible amongst remote rocks, what else can be found? Infinite as it is by nature, the spirit dwells in forms and resonates with things by category, to the effect that the

[transcendent] principle enters even reflections and traces. If a painting is executed to truly marvelous effect, the same will surely occur in it.”⁸

“夫以應目會心為理者，類之成巧，則目亦同應，心亦俱會。應會感神，神超理得。雖複虛求幽岩，何以加焉？又神本亡端，棲形感類，理入影跡，誠能妙寫，亦誠盡矣。”⁹

From the beginning of this passage, Zong Bing emphasizes the combination of subjective perception (“respond to with the eye”) and objective mental engagement (“meet with the mind”). Only when these two are harmonized can painting achieve its highest, transcendent effect.

This spiritual luminescence is further articulated in the fifth section of the Preface:

“Therefore, I live a leisurely life, controlling my vital breath, waving my cup, and strumming my lute. As I unroll paintings and face them in solitude, I probe far into the four desolate corners, not avoiding the overgrowth at the world’s fringes, and confront the uninhabited wilderness by myself. The peaks and grottoes soar high, and the cloudy forests stretch deep into the distance. The sages and worthies cast their reflections from time immemorial, and the myriad things of interest are infused with their spirit and thought. What then should I do? Nothing but let my spirit expand untrammelled. Speaking of the expansion of one’s spirit, how could there be an order of who was before whom?”¹⁰

“於是閒居理氣，拂觴鳴琴，披圖幽對，坐究四荒，不違天勵之叢，獨應無人之野。峰岫嶢嶷，雲林森眇。聖賢暎於絕代，萬趣融其神思。餘複何為哉？暢神而已。神之所暢，熟有先焉！”¹¹

Here Zong Bing uses the Buddhist notions of shen (神, “spirit”) and chang shen (暢神, “to let my spirit expand untrammelled”) to express the highest standard of landscape painting. It “conveys the sense of a sagely radiance actively shining on,

penetrating into, and eventually transforming myriad things into embodiments of the divine spirit.”¹²

By invoking this inheritance of spiritual brilliance, Zhang Lixiang’s *Chengxiang* can be seen as a continuation and transformation of Zong Bing’s artistic concept - it transforms the metaphysical ideal of purification and enlightenment into a visual language of contemporary abstract art. Through this dialogue between ancient thoughts and modern forms, Zhang Lixiang concretizes the “spiritual glow” advocated by Buddhism in ink and space. In this regard, *Chengxiang* not only inherits the core of meditation contained in literati painting, but also extends it to the field of modern abstract art, where spirit and form converge again. In fact, Chinese painting art has long served as a carrier of philosophy and social themes.¹³ Where Zong Bing spoke of the spirit’s transcendence, Zhang materializes that vision through ink, brush, and space, turning metaphysical speculation into perceptual experience.

From the perspective of form, *Chengxiang*’s series of works expand the creative boundary of traditional ink painting. Zhang Yi often uses large-scale rice paper to paint, creating a deep sense of space through layers of halo-dyed ink, while retaining the fluidity of the ink medium (Figure 3). His works belong to non-figurative art, relying on the interaction between ink and emptiness to build a hazy and clear space. In such a space, the viewer’s visual experience is guided to contemplation and stillness-as if not only to face a picture, but to encounter a spiritual inner presentation.

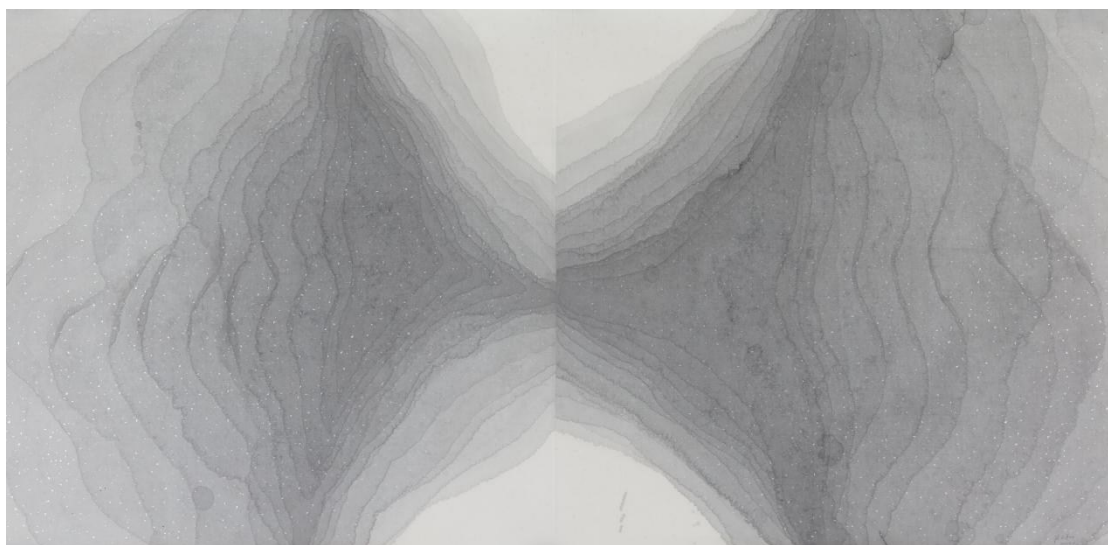


Figure 3. Lixiang Zhang. *Chengxiang* (from the “*Chengxiang*” series). Painting, Ink on paper, 37.80×77.95in (96×198cm), 2023.

This evokes the sublime solitude of Caspar David Friedrich’s (1774–1840) *Monk Before the Sea* (1808–1810, figure 4), which evokes a strong sense of solitude and the infinite.¹⁴ Celebrated as a key work of German Romanticism, Friedrich’s painting explores the relationship between humankind and the sublime natural world—the tension between the finite self and boundless infinity.



Figure 4. Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840), *Monk by the Sea*. Oil on canvas, 110×171.5cm, 1808-1810. Post 2015 restoration. Inv.: NG 9/85. PHOTO CREDIT: bpk Bildagentur/ (Museum: Nationalgalerie/Staatliche Museen/Berlin/Germany) /(Photographer: Andres Kilger) / Art Resource, NY. ASSET IMAGE NUMBER: ART517192. ASSET SOURCE NUMBER: 70139122.

Yet what Friedrich externalized in the infinite horizon, Zhang internalizes through the metaphysical language of ink. The vast expanse of sea and sky in Friedrich’s painting becomes, in Zhang’s *Chengxiang*, the interplay of ink and void—a contemplative field where emptiness is not absence but revelation. The idea of void or emptiness as meaningful space thus connects Friedrich’s Romantic search for the infinite with Chinese painting’s long-standing use of blankness, pause, and ink-wash voids.¹⁵ In addition, in the monk’s resolute figure, we also “find a source of

spiritual strength, defiance even... perhaps a symbol of the resolve of the nation against foreign military rule, as of the individual faced with his mortality.”¹⁶ In Zhang’s solitary forms of mountain and mist, that same strength of spirit endures—quiet, meditative, and luminous—transforming the Romantic sublime into an inward, timeless contemplation.

While Friedrich’s solitary monk confronts the infinite horizon as an external sublime, Zhang’s *Chengxiang* turns that encounter inward. The vast space of the sky becomes the interior void of ink and breath, where form and emptiness oscillate in spiritual dialogue. In this artistic transformation, landscape painting no longer depicts nature, but becomes the concrete presentation of consciousness itself. By transplanting the “sublime” element to the field of metaphysics, Zhang Yi redefined the concept of “abstraction” -as a path to inner enlightenment; in this vision, the brush not only depicts the world, but also reveals the quiet brilliance contained in the mind that gazes at the world. In *Chengxiang*, the dialectical relationship between hard and soft, square and round, sharp and blunt, heavy and no heavy, subtle and rough has become an attempt to reconcile “intrinsic” and “transcendence”. It is through the coexistence of this opposite that Zhang Yi’s paintings have gained profound cultural connotations. This diversity is not chaos, but openness - it presents a harmonious visual expression through differences, which not only echoes the Taoist concept of balance, but also fits the ideas of modern phenomenology. This spiritual openness reflects Zhang Yi’s own life experience. As Clement Greenberg said: “Art is strictly about experience, not about principle.”¹⁷ Zhang recalls:

“After graduation, I worked in Daqing Petroleum Logging Company for eleven years. During this period, I used a wide brush to draw slogans and promote murals. This experience has sown the seeds for my future artistic transformation in the field of Chinese painting. I use different sizes of flat brush, get rid of the traditional pen tip in the center (center) painting, the use of light ink and dry strokes layered pen, depicting the northern winter snow scene - thus creating a desolate, lonely and vast landscape mood. It is through this continuous process of self-transcendence that I have created a technique I call ‘Qi Feng Brushwork’. The word ‘Qi Feng’ literally

means ‘tip alignment’, which refers to a disciplined writing style—each stroke is arranged in a systematic and unified direction to form a cluster of handwriting, which eventually converges into an organic holistic movement and rhythm. This combination of structural and meditative techniques has become the technical and philosophical basis for his later creation of the *Chengxiang* series of paintings.”¹⁸

Zhang also notes:

“Since 2015, based on the foundation of ‘Qifeng brushwork’, I started the creation project of *Chengxiang*. My goal is to analyze and explore the internal logic of *Chengxiang* ink painting. —to construct a central pictorial schema of ‘mountains surging and clouds opening’ (shanyong yunkai 山湧雲開). Through the visual and philosophical interplay of central aggregation and diffusion, and by employing tonal gradations of ink and digital modulation within a grayscale spatial field, I sought to excavate the spiritual reflections and moral resonances embodied in *Chengxiang Ink Painting*. The term ‘Chengxiang’ itself implies observing phenomena with a clear and purified heart, transcending appearances to perceive the inner Dao, and achieving the fusion of subject and object. Through digitally modulated transitions of ink tones, gradated spaces of gray, and layered depths, I guide the viewer’s gaze beyond the visible—toward the ‘image beyond the image’ (xiang wai zhi xiang 象外之象)—thus attaining a limpid realm where ‘distant mountains appear like indigo, and empty waters merge in mist.’”¹⁹

Georges Duthuit, in *Chinese Mysticism and Modern Painting*, claimed that art was “a means of communion with the universe as a whole. (The artist) seeks to control the mass of the forces which rule the earth, the heavens and his own consciousness.”²⁰ Chinese art, he adds, is inspired by “speculations so transcendental, mystical and metaphysical.”²¹

Zhang echoes this insight in his own words:

“The subtle gray tones (gaoji hui 高級灰) produced by light ink on raw xuan paper—gentle, elegant, and ethereal—have always fascinated me. They form the very tonal foundation of *Chengxiang Ink Painting*. In the gradient and hierarchical gray

spectrum, I explore the critical threshold between hard and soft, and finally realize the leap from technique (Jifa) to heart method (heart method). This creative paradigm not only expands the boundary of contemporary ink painting art, but also provides a personalized paradigm for the transformation of traditional art in the digital age.”²²

In this fusion of vision and technique, Zhang Yihua runs through the continuous context from Hui Yuan’s mysterious “image”, Zong Bing’s “spiritual glory” to modern abstract consciousness. By rooting his own artistic practice in philosophical tradition and life experience, Zhang Yihua transformed ink painting into a space where visible and invisible, ancient and modern converge in harmony.

2.Lixiang Zhang’s Chengxiang and Mark Rothko — Abstraction, Spirit, and the Question of Transcendence

Echoing Zhang Lixiang’s *Chengxiang* is Mark Roscoe’s abstract art - the artist’s mid-twentieth-century gamut paintings represent one of the most profound explorations of spirituality in modern Western art. Although the two artists are quite different in culture, geography and art media, they share a common desire to concretize the “unspeakable” - that is, to depict the flow of spirit in light, space and form. In the 20 th century, with the rise of theology, the connection between abstract art and spirituality has been redefined; theology aims to reconcile Western metaphysics with Eastern spiritual traditions.²³ In this context, Rothko’s works of art turn the concept of “sublime” in the West from an external transcendental perspective to an internal emotional abyss. Roscoe’s canvas usually has a grand scale, composed of vast, floating color blocks; the materiality of the pigment creates a sensory appeal that lures the viewer to participate in depth; “The viewer will resonate with the vastness of these paintings, so as to feel a sense of infinity.”²⁴ However, these forms are by no means static geometries - they seem to be levitating, trembling and breathing, creating a field of glowing light that draws the viewer deeply into it. As Robert Rosenblum famously pointed out, Rothko’s work embodies a sense of “abstract sublime”.²⁵ in which form dissolves and the viewer is enveloped in pure color and light.

Rina Ayra indicates that “Rothko presents an interesting case as his work can be understood as spiritual in a broadly numinous way with recourse to the concepts of the sublime and the mystical as well as reflecting aspects of his Jewish identity.”²⁶ The artist himself acknowledged this dimension of direct emotional communion:

“The fact that lots of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I communicate those basic human emotions. The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them.”²⁷

According to Rina Arya, in Rothko’s paintings “the viewer becomes the Rückenfigur who is situated on the edge of the abyss and encounters the vastness, infinity, magnificence, and vacuity of the colored vistas, thus giving rise to the experience of the sublime.”²⁸ When the viewer stands in front of Roscoe’s canvas, he is both an audience and a participant-immersed in a color that seems boundless, extraordinary and full of human color (Fig.5).



Figure 5. Mark Rothko (1903-1970) © ARS, NY. *White Center*. Painting, Oil on canvas, 84×72in (213.36×182.88cm), 1957. David E. Bright Bequest (M.67.25.21).

However, Roscoe's abstract art is still rooted in the Western tradition of "sublime." He continued Kant's concept of "self being overwhelmed by infinity," and his paintings presented a confrontation with the vastness-in this shining void, individuality gradually melted. These works construct what critics call a static theater.²⁹ Here, silence and grand narrative blend, creating a strong atmosphere of almost religious; this experience not only expresses the universal desire of human beings for transcendence, but also reflects the existential anxiety faced by post-war Western society.³⁰ His paintings created in the 1950 s were hailed as one of the brilliant achievements of American painting, which made the post-war avant-garde art stand out. From the perspective of ideology, they are regarded as the concrete embodiment of democratic freedom and eternal universal emotion.

In this sense, Rothko's canvases were not mere images but environments—emotional architectures that enveloped the viewer in an experience of presence and dissolution. His color fields were sanctuaries of the modern spirit.

Zhang Lixiang's *Chengxiang* works construct a parallel yet independent metaphysical context. Similar to Rothko, Zhang Lixiang uses abstract techniques to evoke a sense of transcendence - that is, to achieve the dissolution of form through emptiness and diffusion - but his artistic perception is oriented to balance rather than fracture, and is static rather than awe. Zhang Lixiang's large-scale works do not wrap the viewer through the heaviness of the pigment, but through the transparency of the ink to achieve this sense of wrapping. These works open a meditation space, in which the viewer's eyes move gently between tone and blank, movement and stillness. Therefore, Zhang Lixiang's use of a grand picture form in the "Auspicious Series" has a dual function: on the one hand, this form is eye-catching and evokes the physical sense of directness and intimacy created by Roscoe through the size of the picture; on the other hand, it invites the viewer to have a quiet immersion, which is an experience of the sense of inner space rather than the sense of outer vastness. The energy contained in Zhang Lixiang's brush strokes is like a rhythmic breathing: his

composition sometimes expands, sometimes shrinks, and flashes between filling and emptiness. Through this reciprocating motion, space seems to become a living organism, echoing Zong Bing's artistic concept of *chang shen*, that is, the spiritual expansion of the mind. Different from Roscoe's emotional density which depends on color, Zhang Lixiang's abstract art depends on diffusion and translucency. The interaction between ink color and emptiness creates a space that is both vague and clear, both solid and open. The viewer is not faced with the shocking sense of sublimity in Rothko's works, but the Taoist tranquility contained in *chenghuai*, an inherent transparent state (Fig.6). Roscoe's sense of sublimity dissolves the self in the light, while Zhang's *Chengxiang* clarifies the self through stillness and resonance. Both of them go beyond the concrete expression, but lead the viewer to different paths: Roscoe leads the viewer to the face of existentialism, while Zhang leads the viewer to the enlightenment in meditation.

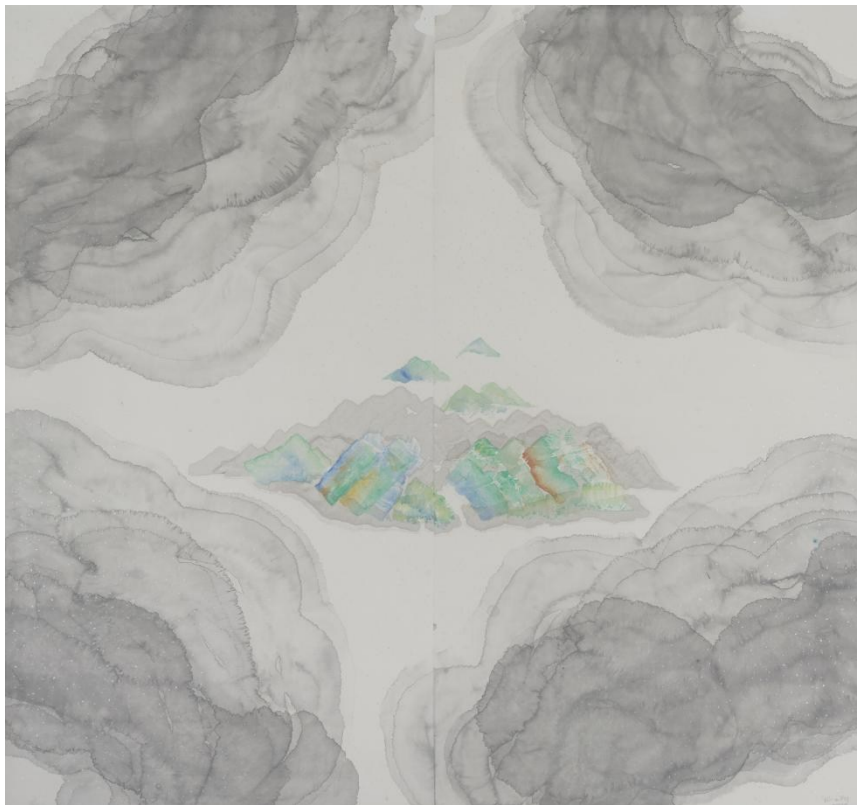


Figure 6. Lixiang Zhang. *Chengxiang* (from the “*Chengxiang*” series). Painting, Ink and acrylic on paper, 70.87×75.98in (180×193cm), 2025.

This kind of inward observation in Zhang's paintings is also reminiscent of the spiritual cosmology in ancient Chinese art. The picture of the overlapping clouds and the strong sense of rhythm almost subconsciously evokes the original image presented in Qiu Ying's (1494-1552) painting "Fuxi Image" (now hidden in the Palace Museum in Taipei). As a primitive cultural hero in Chinese mythology, Fuxi is revered as the ancestor of civilization. It is said that he drew the Eight Diagrams, created the marriage system, cultivated livestock, and created music, etiquette and moral order. Therefore, the mythical image of Fu Xi symbolizes the harmony of the universe and the beginning of human culture. In Zhang's visual language, this ancestor image has not been directly depicted, but has undergone internal reconstruction: the overlapping clouds and ascending peaks in his works have become a metaphor for the same spirit of creation that connects heaven and earth. The spirit of creativity, sense of order and creativity contained in Fuxi is quietly echoed in Zhang's *Chengxiang* transforming the natural landscape into a field carrying cultural memory and metaphysical renewal. Therefore, "Chengxiang" is not only a response to the dilemma faced by contemporary Chinese abstract art, but also an important intervention in the global art spiritual discourse system. Zhang did not regard abstractionism as a style form or aesthetic category derived from the West, but redefined it as a moral and ontological practice - a process of "self-clarification" through ink, breath and rhythm. His paintings reveal that abstract art is not a single and universal grammatical system, but a collection of a series of spiritual explorations - Roscoe's abstract art is rooted in the depth of the tremor of color and emotion; zhang's works are based on the meditation practice contained in brush strokes and emptiness. In this practice, perception itself is transformed into an ethical practice. In this sense, Cheng Xiang's works not only build a bridge between eastern and western art, but also let abstract art return to its original function-that is, as a way of enlightenment, art becomes the carrier of understanding the intangible order of existence. Zhang's reflection on his own creative process vividly shows the presentation of this artistic philosophy in practice. "I can control the number of ink droplets and the ratio of water to ink. For example, when drawing a layer, I add two

drops of ink; add two drops when drawing the next layer. The number of ink droplets is fixed, like a device - this ensures the accuracy of the painting.”³¹

However, this precision is not mechanical, but meditative. “The beauty of gradual change lies in its sense of restraint,” Zhang explained. “In the gray tone, people can express the most abundant levels of change. This richness is not derived from contrast or loudness, nor from the vast space extension, but from the delicate transition in a narrow range. The gradual change of ink is like a quiet color symphony.” He continued: “Through the gentle light ink layering, I try to create such a realm - where, ‘five kinds of ink’ reflects the infinite richness of the world; in the simplest tone, the most profound spiritual world is also revealed. This rigorous creative attitude not only reflects the aesthetic accuracy, but also contains the moral order. Zhang pointed out that each gradient must be gradual - first slightly dark, then slightly bright - like climbing stairs. This sense of proportion reflects an inherent regularity, a self-regulating harmony, just like the reflection of the order of the universe. This obsession with fine control is reminiscent of Roscoe’s precise control of hue and saturation. As E.-M. Papia and A. Kondi have observed, Roscoe’s color gamut is not simply a visual construct, but a carefully calibrated expression of artistic intent .³² Both artists have transformed restraint into inspiration, revealing that precision itself can become a way of transcendence. However, Zhang remains wary of the pitfalls inherent in decorative abstract art - echoing a warning that only when abstract art is reduced to mere decoration will it move forward in nothingness and truly degenerate into dehumanizing art.”³³ For him, ink was never an ornament, but a medium of morality and spirit - a disciplined vehicle for enlightenment. If the light in Roscoe’s works reflects the vastness of the tremor of existence, then the gray gradient used by Zhang reveals the constant pulsation of the Tao. Through the most simple materials such as water, ink and paper, he touched the same transcendental realm as Roscoe’s pursuit of color and light and shadow; therefore, he confirms that the core of spiritual abstract art in both the West and the East lies in the dialogue between the visible and the invisible.

3. Lixiang Zhang's Chengxiang and Isamu Noguchi—Nature, Space, and the Return of the Mind

Different from the abstract art of and Mark Rothko, whose core lies in the sublime experience caused by color, the artistic creation of Japanese-American sculptor and designer Yoshio Noguchi focuses on the dialogue between human beings, nature and space. For Noguchi, sculpture has never been limited to physical objects; it is also a way to reshape the relationship between matter, space and human existence in the world.³⁴

In the 1970s, Noguchi proposed a design for Kukaniloko, a sacred site in Hawaii: he envisioned the use of grass mounds to surround these ancient birthstones (Fig.7). His intention was not to impose a new form, but to implement a minimal intervention - a protective measure designed to protect the site from nearby pineapple plantations and roads.³⁵ Through this creative technique, he transforms the landscape into a meditation space, so that visitors can focus on the spiritual significance of these stone carvings. Here, sculpture becomes space, and space becomes a place of meditation. Konoguchi's artistic creation is more focused on creating an immersive spiritual environment - an environment that invites viewers to participate and guides them to meditate.



Figure 7. Isamu Noguchi, *Model for Sacred Rocks of Kukaniloko*. Foam core, Styrofoam, plaster, paint. 2×24×23 3/4in (5.1×61×60.3cm), 1976. Collection of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 00804. Photo: Kevin Noble.

This spatial mediatization technique has a profound resonance with Zhang Lixiang's *Chengxiang series* works. Zhang Lixiang's ink painting often uses the vast blank area (emptiness) and translucent splashing techniques to construct a visual space that can be called "the domain of the soul" (Fig.8). In the face of these works, the viewer will feel a spatial paradox: there is a sense of openness as if it is an infinite extension, but also contains a sense of introspection with personal color. Similar to Noguchi's interventional artistic technique, Zhang Lixiang's painting does not rely on visual complexity, but resorts to purification and clarification, thus creating a space for spiritual rather than physical dwelling.

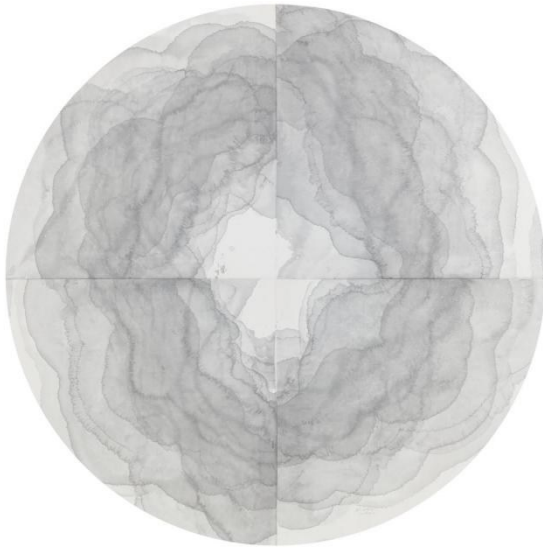


Figure 8. Lixiang Zhang. *Chengxiang* (from the “*Chengxiang*” series). Painting, Ink on paper, 67.72×67.72in (172×172cm), 2025.

Noguchi and Zhang transform space into a tool of mindfulness practice in different ways. However, their common aesthetic view also carries a deeper history of displacement and change. As scholars have pointed out, Noguchi’s artistic career has always been exploring such a question: after the Pearl Harbor incident, how (or how) individual identity is negotiated and positioned in the framework of the racialized cultural context in the United States.³⁶ His art reflects the quest for a sense of belonging in the midst of displacement - a situation that, in his words, requires a way of life, a living space... A world that exists, grows and changes by its own power. ³⁷

Although Zhang’s background is unique, it also bears the imprint of change and tenacity. His parents emigrated to Daqing in 1962, three years after the founding of Daqing City, to contribute to the development and construction of the oilfield; he himself grew up in the material environment shaped by this national cause. From 1964 to 1980, Daqing Oilfield contributed more than 50 % of China’s total crude oil production. By the end of the 1970 s, China has successfully realized the transformation from an oil importer to an oil exporter .³⁸ However, Daqing’s life has always been characterized by a spirit of perseverance: oil workers, whether it is sunny or rainy, work hard in open oil fields all year round and carry out drilling operations. Zhang still clearly remembers the poems created by the “Iron Man” generation - these

poems not only reflect their struggle with nature, but also show their indomitable spiritual strength.

When the oil workers make a loud roar, even the earth trembled three times. With boundless energy and vast courage, no hardship in the world can bind them. Wang Jinxi The north wind is like a fan whistling, snowflakes like dry powder fall in our pot. We have gathered from all over the north and south to join in this battle, vowing to seize the country's best oil exploration position. Do it! Do it! Do it again! Wang Jinxi is between a row of benchmarks, and there is a benchmark towering; the men of steel emerged in response to the call of the "Iron Man". Who are these strong-willed and talented warriors? We proudly answer - we are hope!

Wang Jinxi (1923-1970), known as the King of Iron Man, is a legendary leader of workers in Daqing Oilfield and a symbol of the Chinese nation's perseverance and collective struggle spirit.³⁹ He is known for his unwavering dedication - when equipment fails, he often mixes drilling mud with his own body - an act that perfectly captures the "Daqing jingshen": tenacity, innovation and self-reliance. For Zhang, who grew up in Daqing, this spirit is not a propaganda slogan, but comes from personal experience. This spiritual trait of showing courage in adversity has gradually internalized into his artistic belief. The rush of mountains and the dissipation of mist in his writings are reminiscent of the same moral strength and tenacity that Wang's poetry extols - a vibrant energy that integrates labor, nature, and the indomitable will of mankind. This kind of moral and material continuity between work and creation has been visually presented in Zhang's triple painting "Unrecorded Memory". (《未知的銘記》, figure 9). This work depicts a vast black space, whose layers are like fertile soil layers, extending upward until a narrow white band appears at the top. In the darkness, the fuzzy outline of drilling machinery looms - this is undoubtedly a profound echo of Zhang Zeng's life and work in Daqing Oilfield. Different from the detached and ethereal brush strokes in his later Chengxiang series of works, in this work, the "thick sense of pigment" is highlighted by the palpable density and weight, which is reminiscent of Roscoe's gloomy color field. However, beneath this sense of

gravity, there is a deep reflection on persistence and regeneration: this black land is both a material existence and a metaphor - it is a place where memory, labor and artistic creation meet. By transforming the industrial landscape of the youth into a metaphysical picture, Zhang reinterpreted the oil field work as a spiritual excavation - an exploration of the meaning buried deep in the accumulation of history.

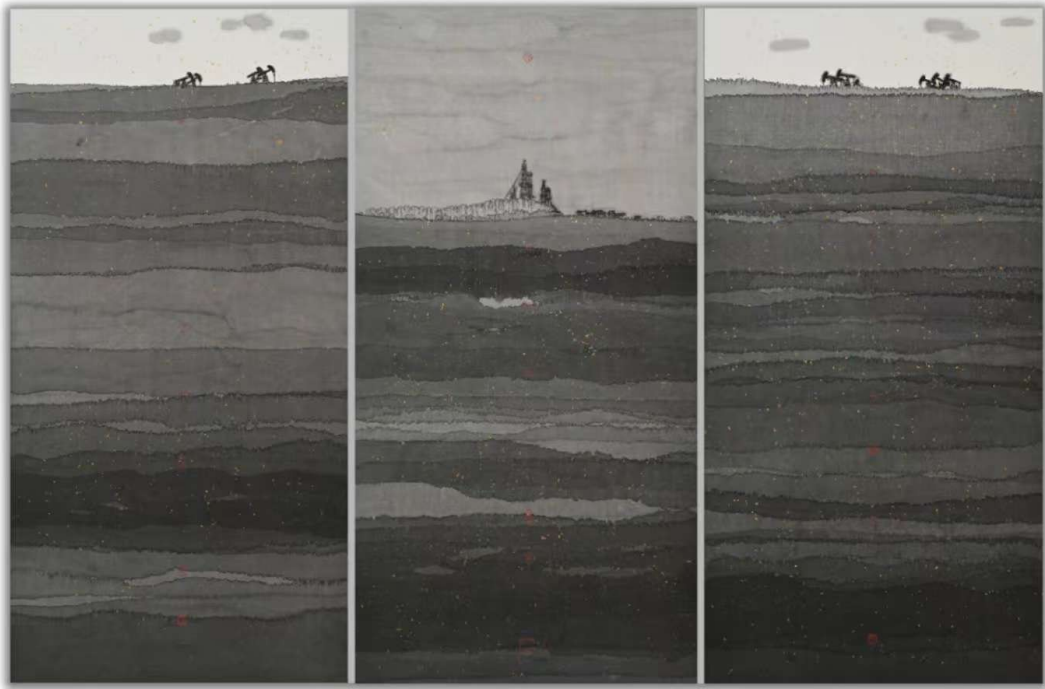


Figure 9. Lixiang Zhang. *Unrecorded Memory*. Triptych, Ink on paper, 51.97×25.98in×3 (132×66cm×3), 2025.

Zhang Chang reflected: “The power of mankind lies in the ability to make mountains (self) rise and clouds (external disturbance) dissipate. For him, the real power lies in the inner clarity - the ‘clarity’ state of the mind’s insight into the laws of the universe. His studio is called ‘Zangdantang’, which embodies the philosophy of perseverance, courage and spiritual resilience.” His later experience also had a profound impact on him: in 2005, he participated in the “Advanced Seminar on Contemporary Art Criticism and Writing” hosted by Professor Yi Ying at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, which deepened his obsession with the theoretical basis of contemporary ink painting. From 2009 to 2013, he followed the growth trajectory of Taihe Art Space and its founder Jia Tingfeng. Jia Tingfeng’s curatorial vision

profoundly shaped his understanding of experimental ink painting art. In 2016, he entered Hubei Academy of Fine Arts in Wuhan (the main center of Chinese contemporary art) to study for a master's degree, under the guidance of Professor Xu Yongmin; professor Xu's guidance in academic research and studio practice has made Zhang's perspective more mature, thus realizing the integration of Eastern and Western art. For Zhang, painting is like drilling oil under the complex crust - an exploratory behavior, aiming to reveal the unknown depth of existence. Noguchi has always been committed to the integration of art and life through nature. "In his garden and landscape design, he successfully transforms the utopian social characteristics embodied in constructivist architecture and the anonymity of the industrial age - and now its minimalist corporate counterpart - into an essentially private and reflective experience."⁴⁰ As Dakin Hart points out, Noguchi's understanding of space is based on experience rather than preaching, and is branching and connected, rather than social normative , thus achieving a multi-level, dynamic and intentional integrity that cannot be fully resolved .⁴¹

One of the earliest examples of this design concept was *Play Mountain*(1934, fig. 10) - a 25-inch plaster cast depicting a midtown Manhattan playground that ultimately failed to be built. The design uses a pyramid-like mound whose slopes, steps and curves are carefully carved so that children can run, climb or slide directly on these sculpture-like slopes.⁴² It was one of the first attempts to dissolve the boundary between fine art and everyday life, transforming sculpture into lived experience.



Figure 10. Isamu Noguchi, *Play Mountain*. Bronze. 3 3/8×25 1/4×28 3/4in (8.6×64.1×73cm), 1933.

Collection of The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 00023. Photo: Bill Taylor.

Zhang himself has said:

“I hope that ‘Chengxiang ink painting’ can open up a spiritual shelter for the viewer and lead him to devote himself to the aesthetic pursuit of tranquility by virtue of its clear and bright characteristics. By precisely regulating the ratio of water and ink, the picture presents a transcendent ethereal and profound sense. This seemingly mechanical precision is actually a conscious balance between freedom and restraint, leading the viewer to a pure meditation space. Through the delicate ink gradient, I build a spiritual exploration path. The theme of ‘Mountains Surging Clouds Opening’ carries multiple spiritual dimensions... How should people find a place to rest for the soul? ‘Chengxiang ink painting’ gives the answer-through the inner peace and firmness, the literati’s traditional ‘view of things to understand their principles’ is transformed into a road of contemporary art.”⁴³

This artistic vision is deeply in line with Noguchi’s pursuit of art as a life space. Both artists regard art as a pure field - a field where the spirit returns to the world through form. Even Western critics recognize the profundity of Chinese art. Although

Clement Greenberg often places Asian aesthetics under his modernist narrative, he still affirms the “psychological subtlety” of Chinese painting and its unparalleled brush stroke sensitivity: This technique conveys precise emotions in every brush stroke, and coordinates each brush stroke - as an independent aspect of emotion - with the dominant emotion contained in the whole painting; in this regard, Chinese painting masters are indeed out of the right. Similarly, Max Lor also observed that by the Ming Dynasty, Chinese painting had no longer just a pure and simple painting, but evolved into a humanistic discipline, an art that integrates academic accomplishment - its style is increasingly abstract, metaphorical and philosophical.⁴⁵

4. Conclusion

By tracing Zhang Lixiang’s “Chengxiang Series” works, this study places his art in the broader discourse system of contemporary art about abstraction, tradition and exploration of spiritual language. Different from the Western modernist art schools, which often define themselves by “rupture” and “negation”, Zhang Lixiang’s artistic practice is based on “continuation” and “transformation”. The ideal of ink painting, Taoist cosmology and literati self-cultivation is not a historical relic, but a fresh framework for him to re-conceive modern abstract art as a metaphysical renewal behavior. His art shows that China’s modernity is not derived from exclusion, but through the “re-enchantment” of traditional forms. By comparing it with Mark Roscoe, it not only reveals the resonance between the two, but also highlights their differences: both artists try to pursue transcendence through color, form and atmosphere; however, Roscoe’s “abstract sublimity” is rooted in the existentialist situation in post-war Western thought, evokes strong emotional impact and metaphysical tension; Zhang Lixiang’s “Cheng Xiang” transforms “sublime” into a kind of tranquility - a balance that echoes the concept of “jingjie” in Chinese aesthetics. Similarly, the artistic dialogue between him and Noguchi also highlights the recognition of the common concern of space as a meditation carrier. Noguchi, however, creates a physical landscape for human contact, while Zhang Yi builds a spiritual sanctuary in the form of a painting - where brush strokes, emptiness, and hues gradually intertwine into an inner landscape of the mind. Through this comparative perspective, Zhang Yi’s

“Chengxiang” is not just an evolution of the style of ink painting, nor a derivative of abstract art, but a philosophical proposition - an attempt to create a new lofty realm with both a global vision and a local foundation. His art contains a sense of disciplined light, in which technical precision and spiritual introspection are combined to construct a universal mindfulness language. In Zhang Yi’s works, abstract art is no longer regarded as a Western invention, but as a common grammar of spiritual exploration, a means of downgrading and difference without erasing the premise of identity. In the end, we re-examine abstract art itself - not as a way to escape from reality, but as a way to return to clarity. In its quiet brilliance, painting becomes a field of existence and enlightenment: where visible and invisible meet; there, the clear and quiet mind gazes at its own reflection.

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