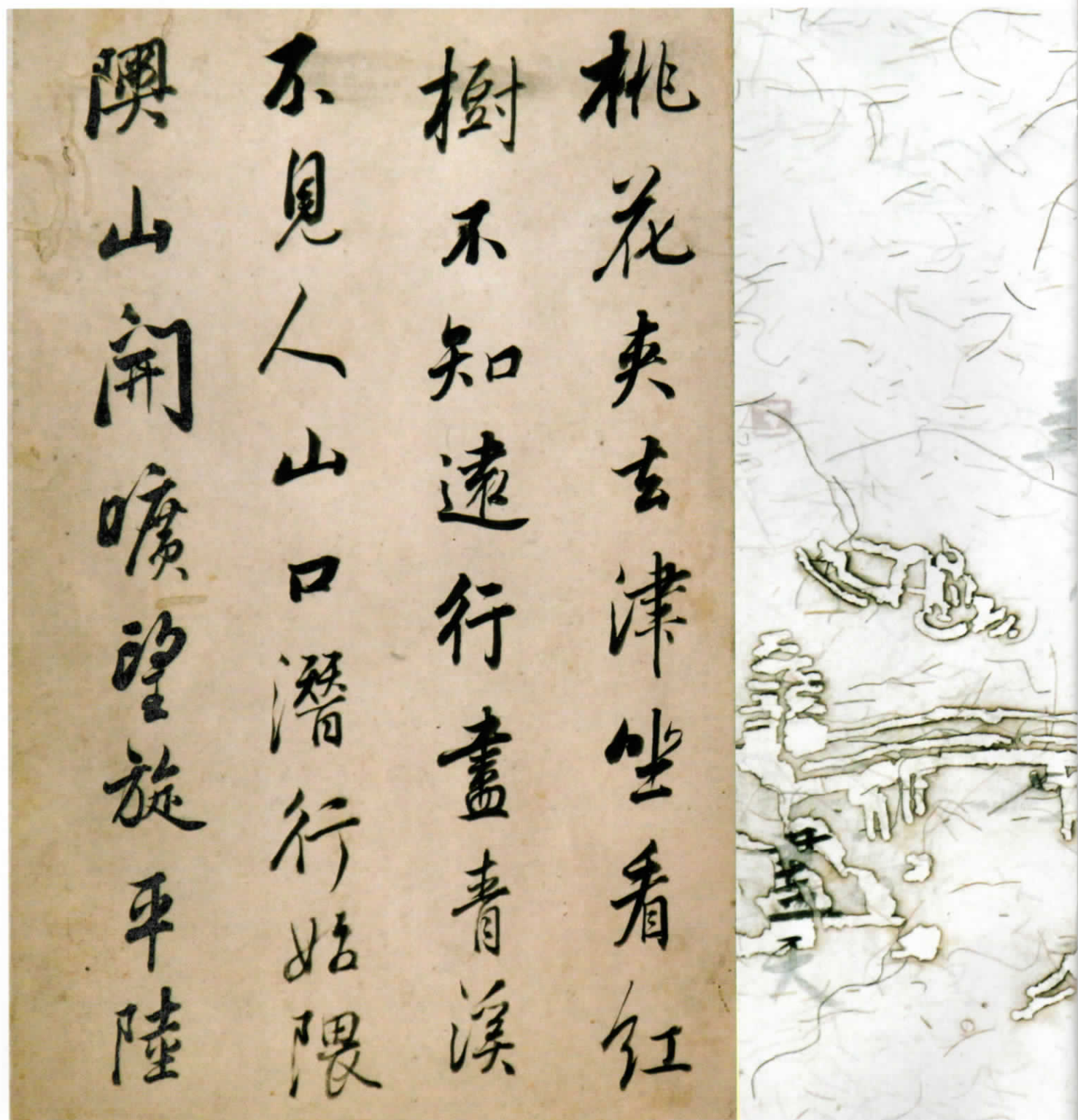


Transforming Landscape

By Ian Findlay



Wang Tiande, Zhang Zhao (1691–1745) – Trip to Shangri-la No.4, 2014, Chinese ink and burn marks on layered paper and Qing-dynasty calligraphy

Ink painter Wang Tiande has, for more than 25 years, met the challenges of interpreting and reinterpreting the art of Chinese landscape painting. He has succeeded magnificently in his quest for something new. Through his art he has given literati painting fresh impetus to speak to 21st-century culture with a resoundingly new voice.



album leaf, 22.5 x 46 cm. All images: Courtesy of the Artist and Alisan Fine Arts, Hong Kong.

Watching the painter Wang Tiande field questions as he moves about his spacious studio on the outskirts of Shanghai is to be aware of someone utterly confident in himself. About him are tables animate with books and paper, brushes and notebooks. Old and new landscape paintings lean against the studio walls waiting to be selected for exhibitions. A few works in progress, of differing sizes, are on the floor awaiting further attention. When Wang stops to look at individual works, he is intent on absorbing their forms into his mental notebook for future reference. One easily imagines him constantly thinking on how to interpret, reinterpret, reconceptualize, and reanimate ink-painting and calligraphic traditions, how to bring fresh concepts and methodologies to his art by enhancing and reinforcing the relationship between tradition and contemporary art practice, how to build upon the metaphors that his art has thrown up over the years.

As one of the most perceptive and innovative of Chinese artists of the past three decades Wang Tiande continues to have a wealth of questions in his mind about his creative processes. But he also has an abundance of creative options and solutions available for future works that will, he hopes, extend the relationships that he has established between tradition and modernity. Wang's intense manner of looking at the world and of speaking about his art has always impressed me over the years I have known him. These are skills practiced since youth, something that befits an artist for whom the masters of landscape painting and calligraphy of the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties are as alive for him today as are his own artistic peers. When he speaks of them, it is with an easy familiarity and deep knowledge of their lives and art.

Some might see Wang Tiande's tradition-inspired landscapes and calligraphy as expressing only a concern with the past, a place and culture so far-removed from the realities of today that they are not worth bothering about. This, however, is incorrect as one discovers in any discussion with Wang on his art. He quickly makes a point that his art is not about one particular time or place but of the past and the contemporary world flowing together into the future and, in



Wang Tiande, *Chinese Clothes No.01-FN01*, 2001, xuan paper, copper powder, burn marks, 138 x 68 cm.



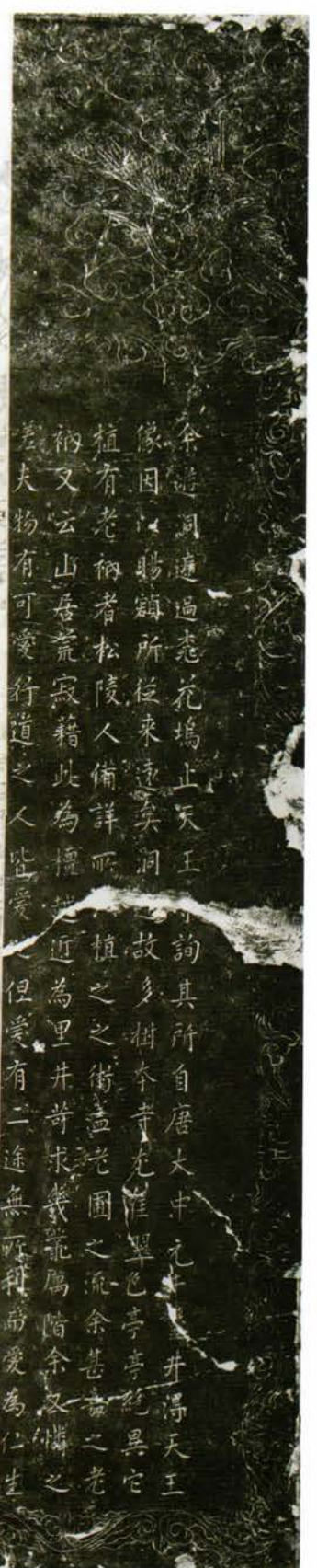
Wang Tiande, *Chinese Clothes*, ink and burn marks on Chinese cloth.

doing so, to be revealing of the human condition along the way. Humanity's concerns are deeply rooted in his painting, photography, and installation art. One only has to look at his *Gu Shan* (2006) photographs and his two *Chinese Clothes* series (from 1996 onwards) that combine the abstract and the conceptual in powerful and emotional works to understand this. Such works speak across time and are deeply concerned with creativity and the transformation in contemporary society, but aided by the ways and philosophies of tradition.

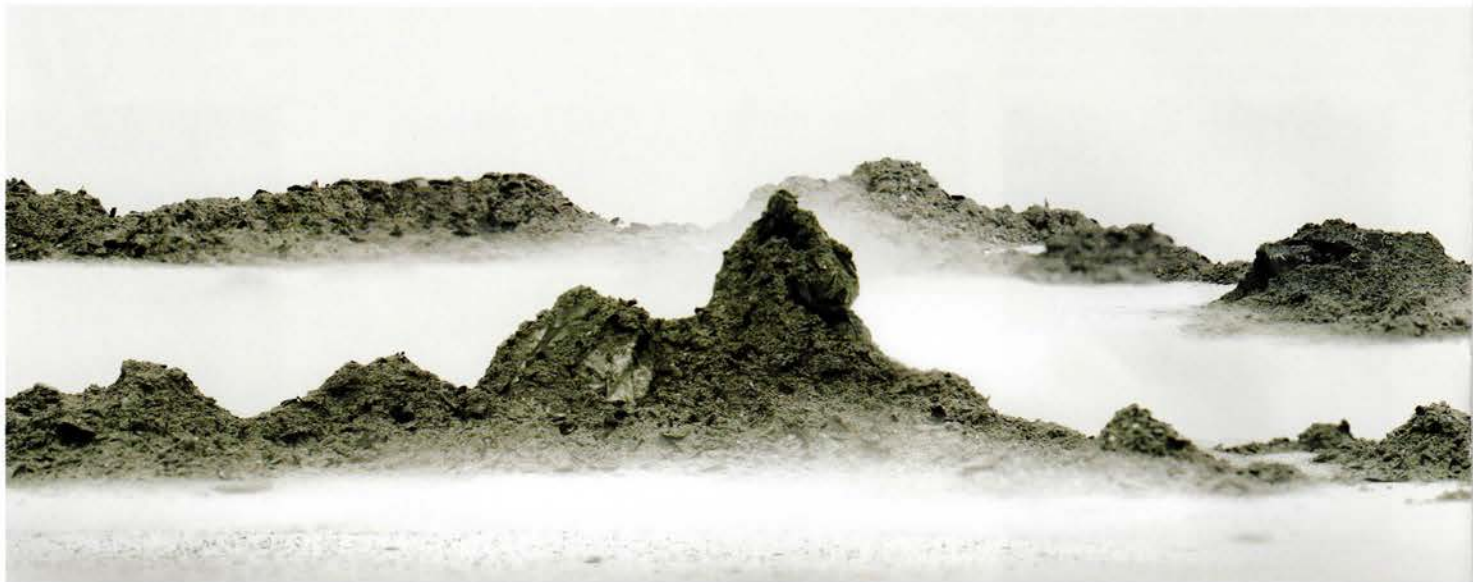
The scope of Wang Tiande's concerns and observations of society is broad and insightful indeed. Among some of the most important in his varied *oeuvre* are the deteriorating condition of the environment, the clash of political and social realities, cultural changes, the challenge of Western art to genuine Chinese artistic change, and the significance of traditional ink aesthetics and materials in the transformation and development of a fresh cultural vision. These ideas are addressed collectively in Wang's perceptive work and his keen understanding of the reality that the past is vitally important to transforming the present if one wants to have any idea where one might go in the future.

Wang Tiande feels "the influence of Western art on the development of contemporary Chinese art has been excessive; now it is time to look more at one's own culture, which means everything from painting and calligraphy to the clothes or costumes that one wore in the past." A dependence on Western art, he notes, has encouraged many young artists to take the easy way out, emulating painting traditions and genres that are essentially foreign to Chinese culture. Studying and using one's cultural history, though, is not as simple as it might appear as one has to almost relive it to come to terms with its potential in art-making for a new age.

As one of the most accomplished artists anywhere today, Wang understands the challenges of transforming revered art forms such as painting and calligraphy, especially as they are being revived after one of the most destructive periods in China's modern history and with few points of reference for most young people. In making art as he does, Wang shows us something of a path that emerging artists might take using both traditional and con-



Above left: Wang Tiande, Digital No.14-HLST001, 2014, Chinese ink with burn marks on layered rice paper and Qing dynasty stele rubbing, 211.5 x 48 cm. **Above right:** Wang Tiande, Digital No.14-MHST002, 2014, Chinese ink with burn marks on layered rice paper and Qing dynasty stele rubbing, 179.5 x 111.5 cm.



Wang Tiande, *Gu Shan 3b*, 2006, digital image, xuan paper, pi paper, stone rubbing, diptych – right, 32 x 163 cm.

temporary sensibilities. His own world is full of aesthetic trials for the viewer. His many social and political metaphors are only revealed through keen engagement with Wang's vision. One thing that is immediately clear in Wang's art, however, is that he is not destroying by burning his paper; rather he is deconstructing artistic traditions and wiping out clichéd expectations of his forms so that viewers may reconstruct his art in their imaginations, making something new of it.

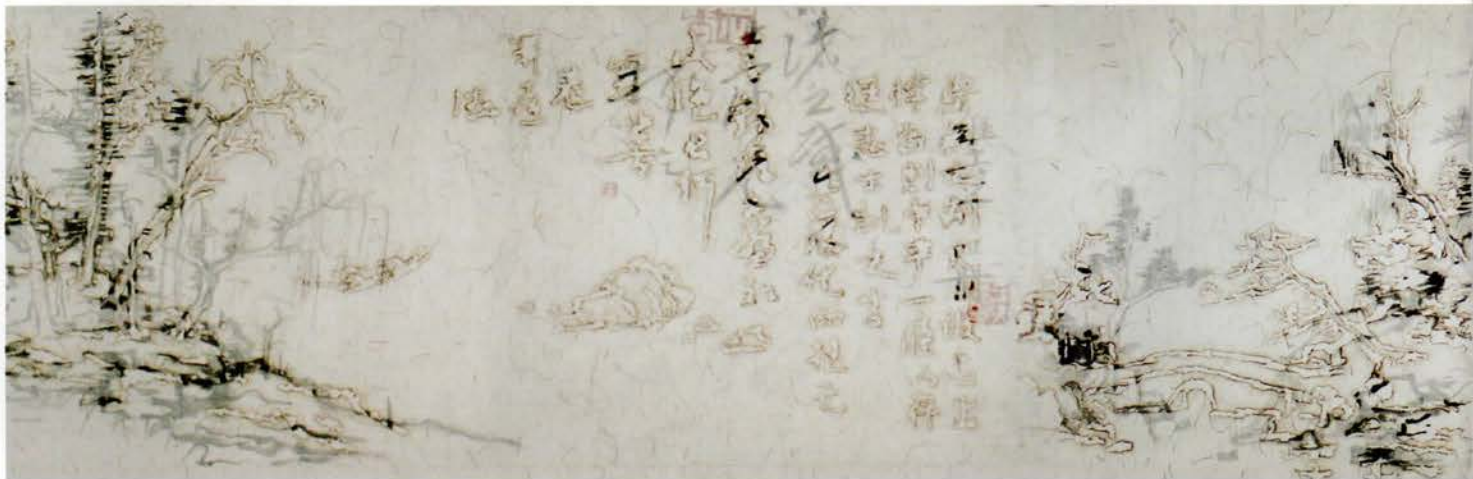
“China's history is full of destruction, and now we must build,” says Wang Tiande. “So, as I have said before, we have to reach a new level of culture, then we need to look to the past. And in turn artists should not only make art for the museums and collectors, but should also make works that speak about society's problems and about one's history. For me the biggest challenge in making my

ink paintings is about my own character and spirit. At the same time, there are also the challenges of space, time, and ideas, and concepts. If you don't have these in your art, there is no sense in it. I use contemporary ink painting and landscape to look at the past.”¹

Wang Tiande's most recent exhibition in Hong Kong, which featured his latest *Digital* series of ink works under the collective title *Mountainscapes*,² continues to highlight the unique visual vocabulary that informs his inspired and stimulating landscapes. The way he burns or marks the paper with a lit cigarette or incense stick to lend a three-dimensional quality to his landscapes and calligraphy always intrigues. The brown line of the trees or the distressed characters' edges is an apt juxtaposition to his ink line, which adds significantly to the overall drama of each work. This is clear in such tall, elegant landscape works entitled *Digital No.14 – LBST007* (2014), *Digital No.14 – LBST002* (2014), *Digital No.13 – LBST016* (2013),

and *Digital No.13 – MHST008* (2013) as in the compact landscapes *Digital No.14 – MHST002* (2014) and *Digital No.14 – MHST003* (2014). The lyricism of Wang's burnt calligraphy is beautifully realized in a work such as *Digital No.10 – CR24 & mini* (2010).

Wang's unique combination of lines lends his beautifully realized and balanced works the kind of still moments and sense of timelessness that one encounters in the best of *literati* painting. Here he combines both traditional sensibility and contemporary visual strength in his art that speaks directly to the environment and its real fragility. Although Wang has long drawn on the fecundity of traditional landscape painting and calligraphy of the Ming and Qing dynasties for inspiration, it is important to the success of his art that his pictorial arrangements also speak boldly to contemporary abstract art practices. If one looks carefully through Wang's *oeuvre*, landscapes and calligraphic works in his *Chinese Fan* series



Wang Tiande, *Yang Tingshu (1595–1647) – Poem by Wang Wen in Running Script No.1* (detail), 2014, handscroll, Chinese ink with burn marks on



(1996) and *Chinese Clothes* series (1998) to his calligraphic *Digital* series (2007) and digital photographic series entitled *Gu Shan*, as well as his *Mountainscape* series (2013–2014), one begins to understand intricacies of his many metaphors and the sheer subtlety of his visual language.

Born in 1960, in Shanghai, Wang Tiande graduated from the Chinese painting department of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in 1988.³ His exposure to *literati* painting traditions and calligraphy has informed all his art, from painting to digital photography to various installation art pieces.

But as he looks back at his childhood years, during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), Wang notes these were also significant in his development as an artist. “The big influence then was there were really no books on art, no museums or culture beyond propaganda. Traditional culture was being destroyed,” Wang says.

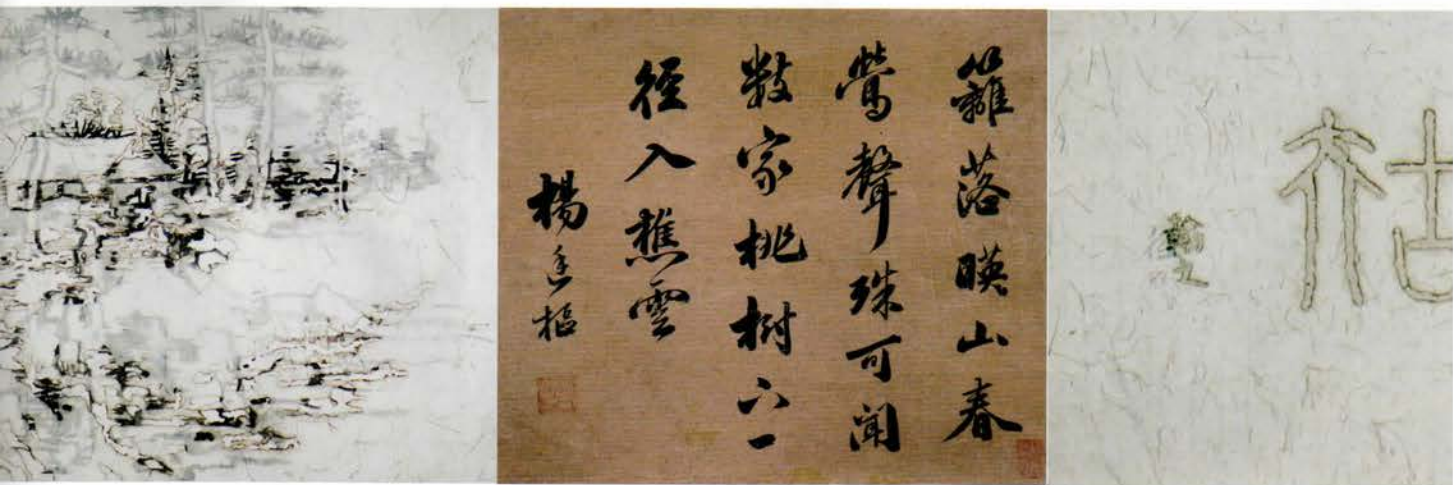
“In primary school my classmates and I had to write and draw on what is known as blackboard newspaper (*beibanbao*).⁴ But a really important influence on me artistically was my big brother who liked music. Art school eventually offered me opportunities to broaden my knowledge but that was only after I had worked for four years in a factory.”

In art school Wang was subjected to an explosion of ideas, inspiration, and influences. Deng Xiaoping’s opening China up to the world allowed a rich flow of Western ideas to take root in society, which enhanced the culture of the period. The 1989 Tiananmen Massacre stopped many of the exchanges and liberal policies for a number of years until the early 1990s. It was then that Wang began to experiment seriously. Throughout his experiments, Wang has always been drawn to masters of the Ming and Qing dynasties but he has also felt the inspiration and the intellectual and artistic influences of such important modern masters as Li Keran

(1907–1989) (“I like his strength”), Huang Binhong (1865–1955), and Fu Baoshi (1904–1965).

Wang has, over the past 25 years, gradually built up an *oeuvre* with an aesthetic that displays a singular merging of tradition and modernity, a unique cultural voice that is genuinely admired. One of Wang’s most striking landscape experiments is his digital photographic series *Gu Shan*. This series is not only outstanding for end product itself but also for the various skills and risks required to put it together.

Gu Shan 3 (2006) was made from burned-paper ashes piled on a table in small mounds and then photographed and digitized in the computer. Each step of the way to full realization of the work is somehow connected to the past and the present, bringing the ephemeral nature of the past into the embrace of the harsh present. *Coal Mountain* (2006), which featured over 50 tons of coal, is one of Wang Tiande’s most soulful installation



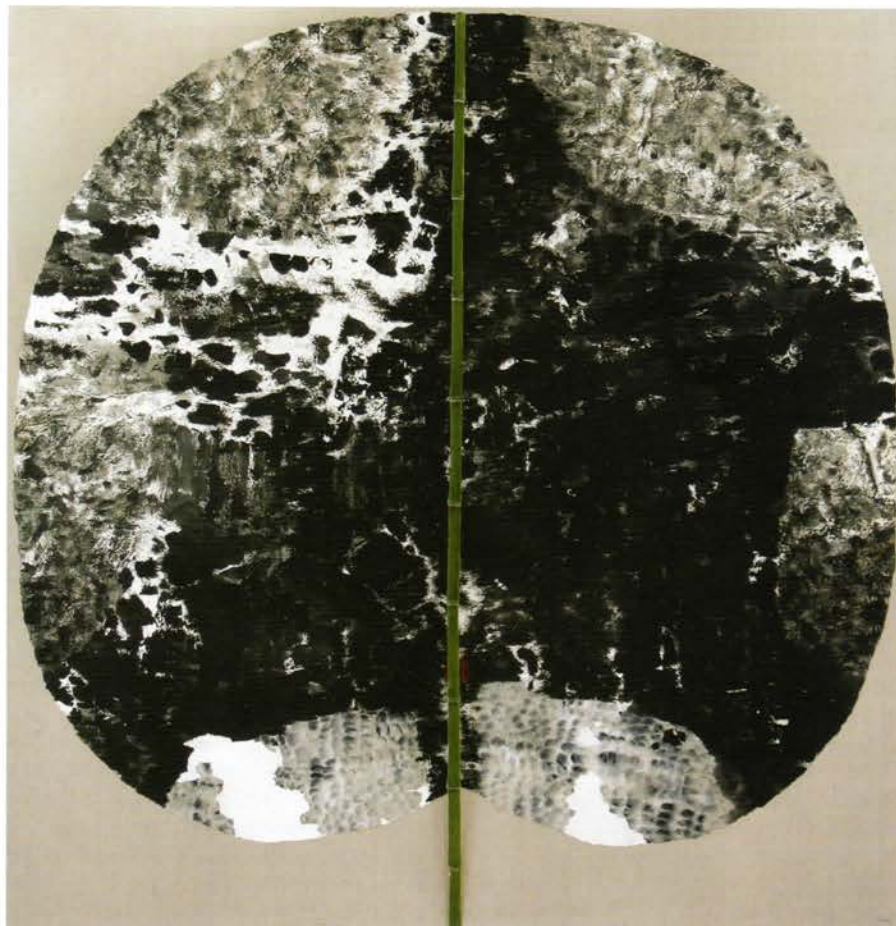
layered paper and calligraphy album leaf, height 25 cm.

works for it not only reminds one of the hard labor required by miners to hack it from the earth, but it also suggests a mountain of black ink that is gradually whittled away over time in the making of ink painting and calligraphy—this by the artist who says ink flows instead of blood in his body.

All the works of the *Gu Shan* (*Lonely Mountain*) series were inspired by Hangzhou's West Lake, a place of great beauty and stillness. I recall fondly that this was the first impression on my visit there, in an early misty morning, more than three decades ago. But standing before the *Gu Shan* works now one does not at first realize how the works were made, that these visions are handmade. They appear as subtle paintings or photographic views from the top of, say, Huang Shan. One escapes easily into the ethereal world of *Gu Shan*, as one does into the past. And this is important for Wang as he says: "Hangzhou is a place where until recently there was real sense of the past, a sense of the timelessness that has gone now and has been replaced by a lot of falseness."

West Lake is a place of deep spirituality, a place where one can meditate without interruption. And this is so with the very best of Wang Tiande's landscapes in which he is generous with details of nature's myriad formations—astutely observed, rich in the lyrical qualities of lines that have been formed not only by ink but also by using a burning cigarette or an incense stick. Every painting is painstakingly realized: the rocks, the trees, the sky, the clouds, the buildings, the bridges, and the water appear to meld seamlessly into powerful individual worlds that demand a viewer's undivided attention. It is such attention to detail that gives Wang's abstract landscapes in his *Chinese Clothes* series and his *Chinese Fan* series such power.

Looking closely at Wang Tiande's landscape art for many years, one has come to understand that he controls each step of a painting completely, from the pressing of the layers of paper—up to four—to give depth to his magical calligraphic forms that often have no meaning beyond being part of the artifice of finished landscape. When one looks at Wang's calligraphy, one can't help but think of the calligraphic experiments by two of his most famous peers, Gu Wenda and Xu Bing. Yet, beneath the formality of each landscape, there is a feeling of something spontaneous happening, which adds significantly to the enjoyment



Wang Tiande, *Chinese Fan*, 1998–2007, xuan paper, ink, bamboo, mounted on linen, 200 x 200 cm.

of his art. The classical calligraphy album pages and the rubbings of characters from old steles that bookend many paintings also enhance the visual power of each landscape. The burning of the line of his tree and rock forms and the calligraphy in the foreground and background of many of his landscapes lends depth to his art that is uncommon in most ink-brush paintings today. Wang's numerous techniques in realizing his landscapes sometimes result in the suggestion of the shimmer that one sees during the intense heat of summer; in other works, there is the sense of rainstorms.

There are times when looking at Wang's landscapes one feels as if one is seeing them through a window, anonymous forms made real and immediate by the constraints of the frame. Yet, however one views them, there is always a sense of intimacy, even with the largest of his landscapes. The ability to seduce the viewer into a scene by creating intimacy where none should exist is a great part of Wang's success as a landscape artist and calligrapher. Although Wang is an innovative painter for whom tradition is at the heart of his *oeuvre*, one never feels Wang trying hard to impress with gimmicks.

Regardless of the constraints of the size of the paintings or photographs Wang seeks always to create the impression that each work appears to reach beyond the edge of the paper and on into infinity. His towering mountains and his fragile-looking trees soar organically out of the earth and up into the heavens. The rawness of nature leaves the artist room to interpret and reinterpret well into the future. Nature's infinite variety is Wang Tiande's true inspiration. Δ

Notes:

1. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations of the artist are from interviews and conversations with the author on April 27 and 28, 2014, in Shanghai.
2. *Mountainscapes: New Ink Art by Wang Tiande* was shown at Alisan Fine Arts, Hong Kong, April 3 – May 3, 2014.
3. The Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, Hangzhou, China, is now known as the China Academy of Fine Arts.
4. The blackboard newspaper or *beibanbao* was a common fixture in schools, factories, and offices where people wrote criticisms or items of interest to the group. This is still quite common in many parts of the underdeveloped countryside.