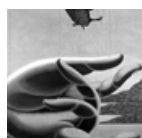


Chen Qi Solo Show
the Making of Water
陳琦~1963



Curator: Tony Chang

2009.8.29-10.15
Opening:
8.29, 15:00pm

[Art Works>](#)

Curator's Preface:

After ten months and two thousand, one hundred and thirty six work hours, artist **Chen Qi** (b. 1963) finally completed his artwork, entitled **1963**, on July 6, 2009. Experimentally blending digital media with the ancient techniques of water-based printmaking, he devised a complex and exacting printing process using ninety-six woodblocks with nine color applications to depict, on an area measuring 7.8 meters high and 3.35 meters long, waves of water flowing from the inner depths of his heart. 1963 is a testament to the unprecedented ambition and conceptual creativity of one of the only contemporary artists to continue the technique of Chinese water-based printmaking.

Meditating on water in front of the computer screen stretched the limits of the artist's creative perceptivity. While in the process of producing *1963*, Chen attempted to find some ancient ink in the hopes that this old inheritance from past dynasties would smooth out the sea of ink that had been swallowed up by the cold, rational digital bits. Through torturous effort, Chen Qi attained the wish he has held since a child, realizing his lifelong pursuit of water.

1963 is a unique, singular work. It does not have the multiple editions common to printmaking, because time is unredeemable. Standing before this vast body of water that is highly realistic and yet radiates the glow of abstraction, one forgets himself and melts into the ether of impermanence.

In the artist's two decades of artistic practice revolving mostly around water-based woodcuts, *1963* is an

*10 Months, 2136 Work Hours,
96 Woodblocks, 9 Color Applications,
A Massive Impression Spanning 26 Square Meters,*

*1963 by Artist Chen Qi
(b. 1963)*

- Waves of Water from the Inner Depths of Heart.

*An Experimentation
Blending New Media with Ancient Water Print,*

A Meditation on History & Life Experience,

Conceptual Creativity Carrying forward the Heritage of Chinese Water Print.

The Making of Water: An Introduction

Through **digital sketching, wood carving and the nine layer color application process**, it took two thousand one hundred thirty six hours. The resulting image is 7.8 meters by 3.35 meters.



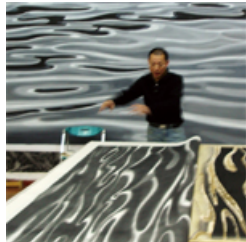
I. Digital Blueprint

October 2008 - January 2009, Seven Hundred Thirty Six Work Hours

important conceptual breakthrough. **"When the spirit melds with the myriad things, the mind can complete any task"** (*Su Dongpo*, Song Dynasty). **1963** emphasizes the process aspect and the challenges that arise in creating across mediums, transcending the concepts of on-canvas painting and printmaking. From the deep sands of culture, artist Chen Qi has picked up the broken spear of the ancients and dauntlessly traverses the mysterious realm that lies between history, reality, the external world and the subjective subconscious.

Facing **1963** as a curator, my intentions are depictive. My wish is to objectively document this experimental creative process, and to find within Chinese cultural traditions a perspective from which to view it from afar. Chen Qi's creations face directly inwards, so a presentation of his individual life experience will be of assistance in tracing the roots of his conceptual ideas in his contemporary artistic practice.

Chen Qi's Art & Chinese Heritage:



In ancient Chinese philosophy, water not only has metaphysical significance, it is also a carrier for cultural allusions. These meanings come together to form artist Chen Qi's subconscious foundation as a contemporary protector of Chinese literati traditions.

I. Wisdom of the Dao

Spring & Autumn Period, *Lao Tzu*, *Dao De Jing*: The supreme good is like water, benefiting all things without conflict. Late Spring & Autumn Period, *Confucius*: The wise take pleasure in rivers and lakes, the virtuous in mountains; the wise are happy, the virtuous long-lived.

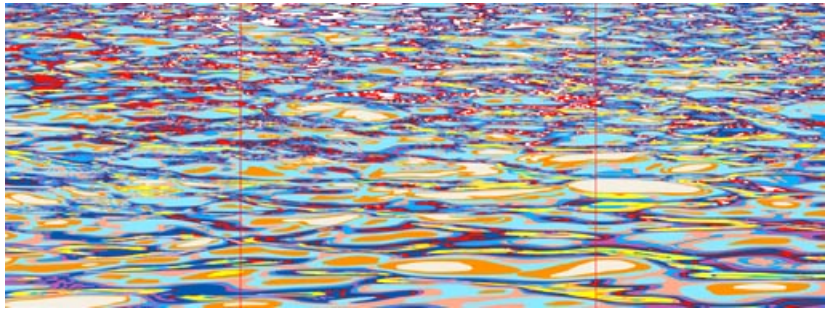
II. Literati Intelligence:

Warring States Period, *Qu Yuan*, *The Fisherman* in *Anthology of Chu Poetry*: When the waters of the Canglang River are clear, I can wash my tassels; when the waters are muddy, I can at least wash my feet.

Eastern Jin Kingdom, *Wang Xizhi*, *Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Poems*: The pavilion has clear rushing water, reflecting the sunlight as it flows past either side, the pavilion divides the water into flowing brooks.

III. Time and Sense of History:

Late Spring & Autumn Period, *Confucius*, *Zi Han* in *The Analects*: The master, standing by a stream, said "it passes just like this, all through the day and night". Southern Song Dynasty, *Xin Qiji*, *To the Tune of Pusaman*: The verdant mountains



It would be very difficult to complete the wave marks for such a large picture by hand. In October 2008, Chen Qi decided to complete the blueprint for 1963 on a computer, relying entirely on his own inner memories and perceptions, laying out the undulations and movement relationships of each wave from nothing. Chen Qi has said, **"I rarely do life study sketches. All of the scenes and scenery in my works are woven after fermenting in my mind for a long time, but the foundation for composition is based on my flowing consciousness and my static emotions, a revelation of the depths of my consciousness"**. In the computer, the depiction of waves is a confrontation between spiritual truth and objective truth, lending Chen Qi an opportunity to describe the subtle undulations of his inner world. Digital painting becomes for him a private internal activity akin to prayer.

Unlike canvas painting, computer painting extracts the physical properties of medium (paper, ink etc), and removes the elements of size, dimension and the pressure of the brush; movement has been reduced to partial moving of the fingers and the forearm. Faced with the infinitely moveable and expandable surface of the computer screen, Chen gradually sank into a state of meditation and play: in the void, there were only the untouchable, weightless curved lines and the soft, microscopic pulsations of the spirit. As he grasped each thin line with the cursor, Chen had to determine each minute variation in each ripple among countless undefined positions, a decision that would influence the dynamic rhythm of the entire picture. The fate of each line was fragile, and under the cursor, they became like the myriad things in the hands of the creator, or the lotus flower under the Buddha's thumb. All alone, the artist was given absolute freedom. His thoughts cruised about on the sleek surface created by tens of thousands of curves, bringing him into a pure realm. The ripples of the water became immaterial, like light and strange illusions on black silk. The whole world became like the hum of a seashell.

II. Boards Carving

January-May 2009, One Thousand Forty Work Hours



The size of *1963* and the richness of ink shades has become a challenge to the limitations of water-based printmaking. In the Chinese classical spirit, "the numbers of the world begin with one and end with nine", and for this reason, Chen Qi splits the color applications into nine stages to achieve the desired shade changes in the waves. Each application requires one set of boards to complete, with nine boards in total. He designed a complete execution system: the 7.8 meter by 3.35 meter work is separated into four sections horizontally, with each section composed of three 2 meter by 1.2 meter boards placed together. Each color application requires twelve boards, and with nine color applications that requires ninety six boards (two color applications are used for one board).

Chen Qi outputted his computer generated blueprint in separate colors, applying the nine different color applications to ninety six boards. Using ancient handcrafting techniques, he began the slow carving process. As the wood was carved away, the water lines began to emerge and flow through the grain of the wood.

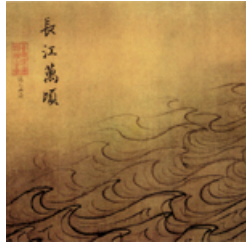
cannot stop it, it will still continue flowing to the east.

IV. Mysticism Related to Dragons and Fish:

Warring States, *Chuang Tzu*, Enjoyment in Untroubled Ease: In the Northern Sea there is a great fish, the name of which is Kun.

Tang Dynasty, *Liu Yuxi*: It matters not whether the water is deep, but whether or not there resides the spirit of a dragon.

Aesthetic Formulae of Water in Ancient Chinese Landscape Painting:



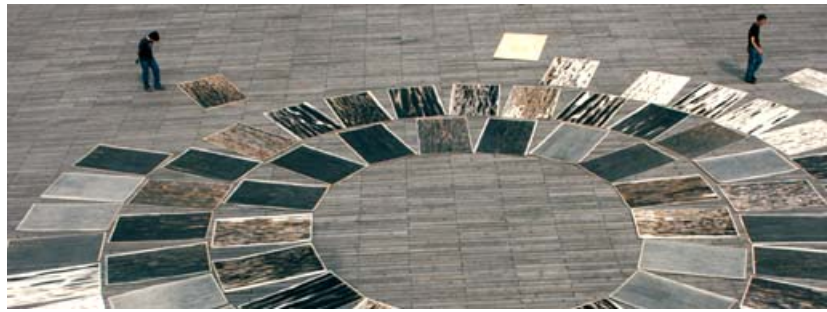
In traditional Chinese esthetics, water is the material manifestation of man's spirit, an embodiment of the conceptual pursuits of Chinese literati. In ancient painting theory, the different qualities of water through the seasons were developed into aesthetic expressive patterns. According to the Qing Dynasty painter **Qian Du**, in his *Songhu's Treatise on Painting*, "Water comes in the form of lakes, rivers, seas, streams, creeks, waterfalls and springs. Lakes are flat and expansive, rivers can be murky or broad, seas are turbulent, streams are playful and curvy, and waterfalls rush." Song Dynasty artist **Li Yingqi**, in his *Formulae for Landscapes*, emphasized the varying states of weather through the seasons: "In spring, water is green and calm, in summer it swells and floods, in autumn it is rushing and clear, in winter, the springs become solid and unmoving."

Masters of Carving since Ancient Times.



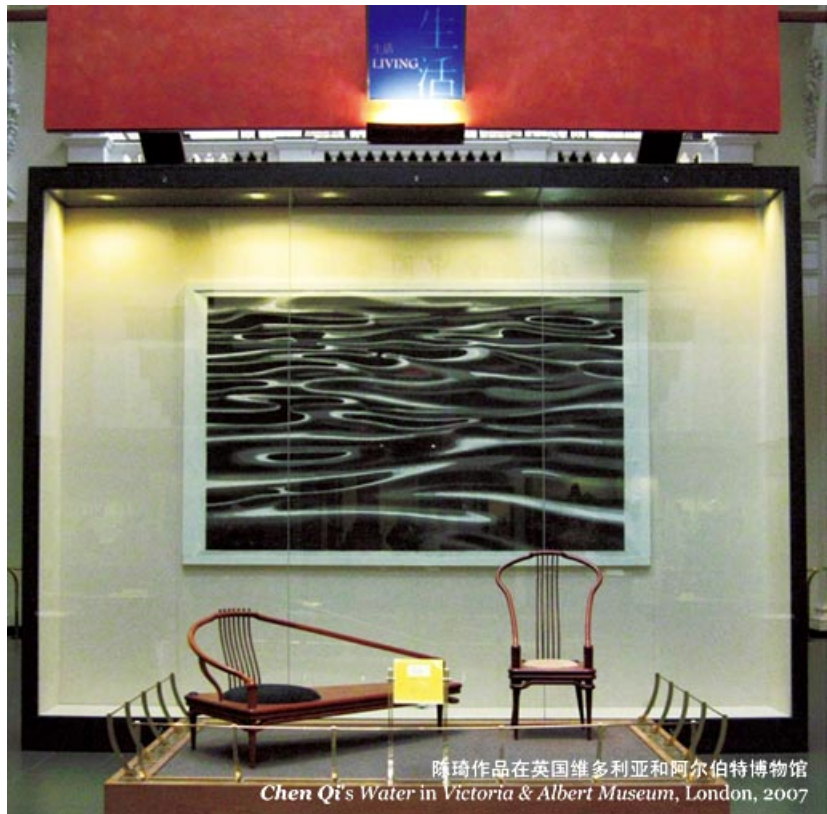
China is the birthplace of woodcut printing. In the mid and late Tang Dynasty, it was used to print illustrations for Buddhist sutras. From the reign of Ming emperor Wan Li into the mid Qing Dynasty, printmaking techniques were gradually perfected and the carvers of Huizhou were unparalleled by then. At the time, metals such as copper or clay, wood and porcelain molds are used to make movable type in the printing of texts in printed books, while the images were first drawn by painters, then carved into woodblocks by carvers,

III. Nine Colors Printing May-July 2009, Three Hundreds Sixty Work Hours



Water-based printmaking is a complex ancient technique. Factors such as the wetness of the wood and paper and the pressure applied can all affect the final outcome. Through the control of wetness, Chen Qi can make the ink of the lines expand or explode, and these complex effects depend entirely on years of accumulated perceptivity and understanding. Sometimes the printer must use his tongue to determine the level of moisture on the paper. 1963 is the embodiment of Chen's strong grasp of printmaking techniques, radiating the rational wisdom of the mature artist. Atop the nine applications of layers, Chen also created gradual tonal shifts in each color layer, making for even more subtle and delicate shades. Each color application uses interlocking boards, making for precise alignment and effectively avoiding any mislays or seams.

The layers of ink were pressed in a process that took three months. The water lines move from ripples to waves, freshly conveying lush water and bright and clear reflections. **Chen Qi's contemporary value lies in his use of water-based printmaking to establish an independent artistic language.** The printing process dampens the limitations of the original draft and makes use of the artist's subjective consciousness in the process of creation. The flow of consciousness is conveyed through the improvisational spirit and the free-moving marks.



陈琦作品在英国维多利亚和阿尔伯特博物馆
Chen Qi's Water in Victoria & Albert Museum, London, 2007

Marching from Modernism to the Contemporary

Under the guidance of *Lu Xun*, modern water-based woodcut carried on traditions while absorbing printmaking techniques from abroad. The core concept was a pursuit of the aesthetical ideas of "knife flavor" (the use of cuts to convey the subject matter), "wood flavor" (the use of the natural texture of the wood grain) and "water flavor" (the concentration of water-based pigments

ready for printing the rich illustrations.

The illustrations for such books as *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* and *Western Chamber Romance* spread the literati spirit and folk culture like wildfire. Among such books, the *Ten Bamboo Studio Manual for Painting and Calligraphy* (carved during the Ming Dynasty over an eight year period ending in 1627), displayed the blended colors of ink wash painting, making distinguished achievements in the formulaic language of "five shades from each ink".

The Literati Spirit in Water Woodblock Print.

Differing from Chinese painting, which uses brush strokes for expression, water woodblock printing uses a perfect combination of drawing, carving and printing to convey aesthetic uniqueness and spirit. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, painters used ink to lay out an image which the carvers would cut into jujube and pear wood. Venerated painters such as **Tang Yin** and **Qiu Ying** took great joy in this new method of self-expression, and were happy to paint images for the carvers; the most famous such artist was **Chen Laolian** (1598-1652).



Chen Laolian's style was fiercely independent and unique. Towering above the other artists of the Ming and Qing dynasties, he had a powerful influence over the development of Chinese figurative painting. He stood aloof from the world, which he looked down upon, and had a habit of drinking away his indignation. Working together with carvers, he created a series of drinking game cards entitled *Pages from Outlaws of the Marsh*: the work depicted the heroes of the marsh in sketched lines that brought out the cavalier and heroic traits of the characters, strengthening the expressiveness of lines in literati painting and bestowing them with the painter's spiritual ideals. The participation of these elite literati brought the publication of the classics to its heyday, and initiated a coalescence between the high and vulgar spirits, moving the ivory tower of the literati's study towards street culture. Just as modern silkscreen shaped pop art, the common culture aspects of printmaking from the Ming and Qing dynasties, represented by such works as *Pages from Outlaws of the Marsh*, enriched the Chinese literati spirit.

and changes in moisture levels). Famous print artists such as *Li Hua*, *Huang Yongyu*, *Song Yuanwen* and *Ying Tianqi* used water-based print creations to march towards the contented realm of modernism.

Over two decades of research and practice have made Chen Qi a leading contemporary artist who has creatively updated the traditional water-based printmaking techniques. Beginning in the '85 New Wave, Chen bravely transformed and moved beyond modernism, incorporating the lighting ideas of Western paintings and expanding water-based printing beyond its original limitation to Chinese ink painting and modernist aesthetics. He explored water-based printing's contemporary expressive abilities through independent artistic language, and transformed the traditional simple workshop techniques into a modern system of production management. **Especially praiseworthy is his attention to the conceptuality that arises from the creative methodology of water-based printing as a component of cultural heritage, entering into contemporary experimentation that transcends aesthetics.**

Contemporary Conceptual Ideas in 1963

Time and Process: Chen Qi sees the long process and arduous tasks as a Sisyphus-like process of personal spiritual tempering. He emphasizes the mysterious fermentation effect of time. **Ludwig Wittgenstein** said, "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence." Through 1963, the artist dove into the abyss of time, engaging in a perpetual effort to close in on essence and contemplate time. *The Collection of Bizarre Stories* from the Southern Dynasties spoke of a man who mistakenly wandered deep into the mountains and saw two children playing chess, watching them for so long that his axe handle rotted away. For Chen Qi, the process of creating 1963 was just like that. He experienced one of the most enchanting, yet lonely moments in life. Facing the vast inky waves of 1963, a sense of detachment rises up as if from another world.

Indirectness and Depersonalization:

Looking over Chen Qi's works, we can see the elite literati traditions in their contemporary form. His works always have a form of mysterious tranquility to them, effortlessly summoning a broad field of resonance. The landscapes he depicts seem to only exist in the depths of memory. His lotuses have an absolute and solemn sense of form, blossoming in time and space as if they would never wither.



The German sinologist **Lothar Ledderose** believes that one of the ancient traditions in Chinese implement-making for things such as terracotta warriors and bronze objects, was to work from a model but also to imbue it with aspects of the artist's individual personality, so that objects would be standardized but also embody personality, an irrefutable creative principle of ancient China. Ledderose later shifted his focus to the transformation of technology in art, or the esthetic elements of processes in craftsmanship. Similarly, water-based woodcut printing uses printmaking techniques, and there is an indirectness to the artist's creation; there is a strong sense of history to the cultural and aesthetic forms carried by water-based printing. T.S. Eliot believed that "the progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality". When Chinese artist **Xu Bing** talked about his work, *Book from Heaven*, he said, "I have discovered that things that have been emptied of personality are more able to touch on the essence of the matter". The indirectness of printmaking has provided artists such as **Xu Bing** and **Chen Qi** with the possibility of linking their creative personalities with ancient times. In the fog of history, Chen Qi has turned the indirectness of printmaking into a means of "depersonalization". He has transcended the limitations of the individual. In this solemn work, instead of the personalized brush strokes, he moves towards the eternal power of purity.

1963 casts off the distraction of personal aesthetic tastes. The resulting image approaches realism while sparing no effort in pursuing abstract purity. In addition, without any traces of temporality, 1963 remains tightly intertwined with

time. The light that radiates off the water is the light from the creation of the world, and the light that flows through our emotional space. The waves ripple across from ancient times to today, boiling with all of our most hidden perceptions of life.