

SHEN CHEN

RECENT PAINTINGS

CYNTHIA·REEVES

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PAINTINGS IN MEMORY OF TIME AND INFINITY

Robert C. Morgan

SHEN CHEN is a Chinese artist, living in New York. This is not unusual. Over the past twenty-five years, some of China's most gifted and celebrated artists have followed a similar geographical transfer. When I met Shen Chen nearly a decade ago, his work had been moving forward for some time. His studio was in good order and exhibitions were happening on a regular basis in China, the United States, and beginning in Europe. In an interview for a catalog published on the occasion of a solo exhibition at the former China Square Gallery in New York (2007), Chen asserted that upon losing his "identity" by coming to the United States, he felt an extraordinary sense of liberation, an endless surge of energy. He could not stop painting.

In contrast to other important Chinese artists living or who have lived in New York, Chen functions solely as a painter. He is very clear about his position. He is committed to painting as a form that gives him the space and time to do what he wants and to express what he needs (without necessarily being expressive). For Shen Chen, there is no reason to take photographs or to make installations. He has no incentive to perform or participate in media-driven spectacles that, in recent years, have seduced so many artists. He is a painter, specifically an abstract painter, intent on working with the surface, using acrylic paint the way he was trained to use ink. His medium is clear and so is his direction. I have always found the depth of quality in these paintings refreshing, if not rejuvenating. They are honest and to the point. All of Chen's paintings are *Untitled* and numbered. Although he does not indulge in "poetic" references, his delicate multi-layered surfaces have a considerable depth and breadth. They hold an enormous capacity to register meaningful insights about the world in which we live. Chen is a mature artist. He grasps the subtleties in the world around him with a remarkable accuracy, always with resolve and purposeful restraint. His intelligence is inseparable from his ability to feel.

Shen Chen started thinking in terms of abstract painting shortly after graduating from the Shanghai Academy of Theater in 1982. Working in virtual isolation, he began exploring various experimental approaches to ink painting, using ink and brushes on large sheets of *xuan* paper (made from crushed elm bark and mulberry leaves). At the time, his decision to work with these materials in relation to abstract form was not only radical, but also difficult. Chen's intentions were limited to some extent by the premise that no immediate character for the term "abstract" (as used in Western art) existed in the Chinese language. Therefore, the artist's ability to articulate what he was trying to do was limited. Perhaps the most

obvious hindrance to Chen was the overwhelming trend in China toward large-scale figurative expressionism, largely influenced by major European painters. In general, this manner of painting, primarily among contemporary artists in Beijing and Shanghai during the 1980s, resulted in such styles as Cynical Realism and Political Pop. This kind of loose figuration seemed the most obvious retort in countering the use of Socialist Realism embraced during the Maoist era. Although popular among European collectors before coming to New York in the twenty-first century, this approach to painting was going in the opposite direction from what the young Chen had chosen to pursue.

Rather Chen was interested in returning to the source of Chinese painting, initially using traditional materials before moving into acrylic paint on canvas. The shift from xuan to canvas, and from ink to acrylic happened in the United States where he settled in the late 1980s. Ironically, it was here—not in China—where some of Chen's most important advances were made. (One might say the same for other artists who preceded him, including Ai Wei Wei, Wenda Gu, Xu Bing, Xai Guo Qiang, Wang Dongling, Zhang Jian Jun, and arguably Zhang Huang.) To get at the source of abstract painting, Shen Chen felt the need to leave China and study painting in the United States—initially at Skowhegan, followed by the New York Studio School, and eventually Boston University, where he received his Master of Fine Arts degree in 1990.

As this exhibition makes clear, Chen paints without representational subject matter. In *Untitled No. 10221–09*, the vertical canvas reveals a horizon near the top. The dark charcoal effect accentuates the white space, moving through a subtle field of softly tinted pink shapes. The color is so faint one might have to test one's vision to be certain it is there. For Chen, this idea of color within the space of dark and light was one of the major contributions found in the landscape masters of the Northern Sung Dynasty from the tenth century in China. A similar technique is visible in *Untitled No. 22628–14*. Consistently vertical, as Chen's paintings appear (except for the triptychs), the dark areas that emanate from the horizon reveal traces of orange light in a way similar to the previous painting from 2009. In a related painting from one year earlier, *Untitled No. 32238–13*, the orange light between the darkness is more visibly apparent, as if the color fades in and out according to the register of the light and dark.

Compare this, for example, with a more Baroque-style painting—Chinese Baroque—as the case may be. I refer to *Untitled 40133–13*, from the same year. One may immediately detect the more pronounced, sonorous horizon at the top with the multi-color blocks of color along the bottom edge, colors ranging from yellow ochre to green to blue, more electric than primary colors from the natural spectrum. Yet there is something pulsating color to nature here, even so. In a quandary as to the

exact meaning of the ancient Chinese expression, “*mo fen wu se*,” I inquired with the Shen Chen as to whether he could explain. After seeing the previous painting, I was flummoxed and in a state of modest disequilibrium. The prompt answer I received, during an exceedingly busy time in his schedule, goes as follows:

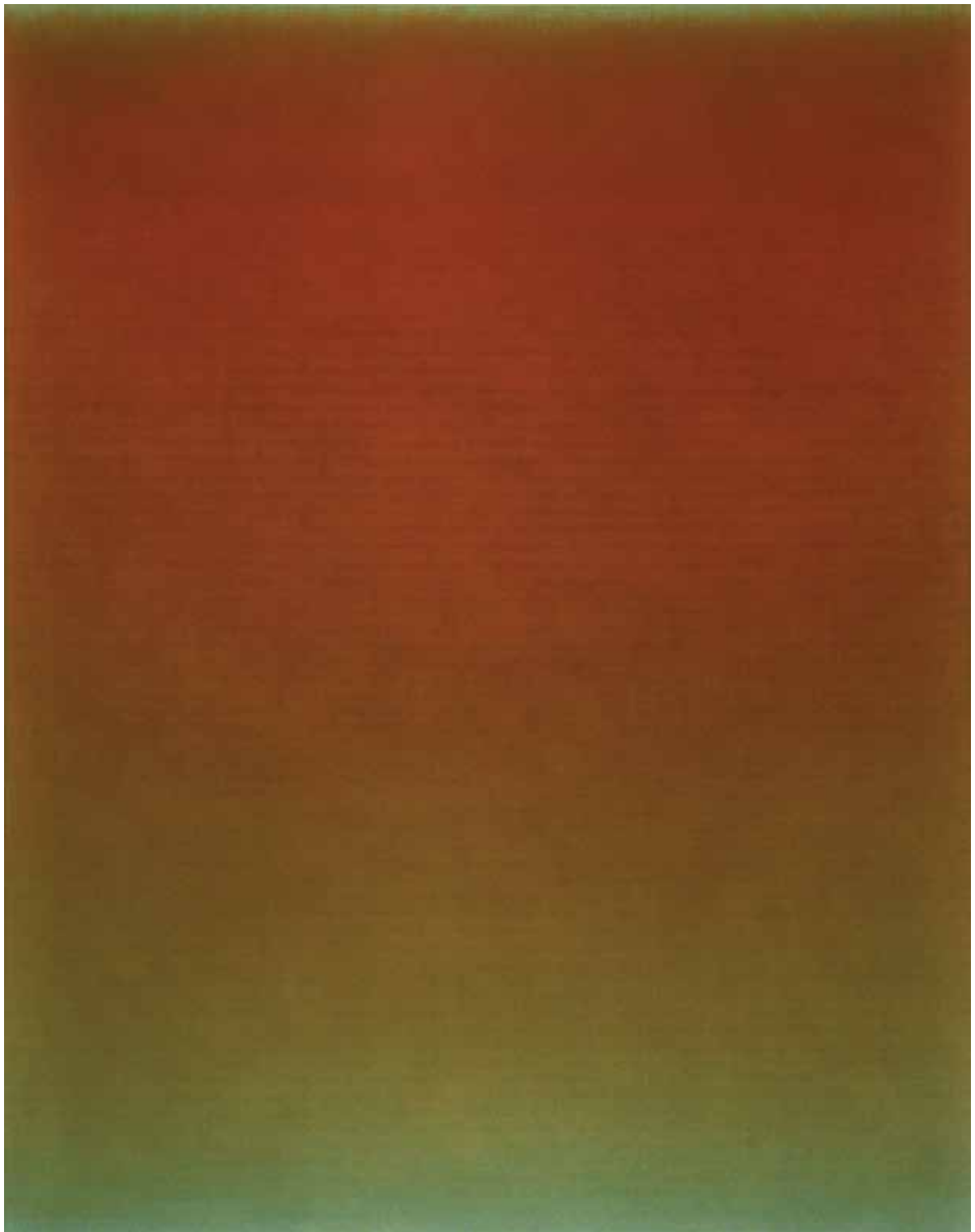
My understanding of “*mo fen wu se*,” the five truths in Ink painting, [is about the way we] use ink, how to make painting, and more importantly, how to view and express the world (subject) in black and white “colors.” Five Truths, could be all different colors (or shades), [but they] are all from a single source, which is black (ink). From that point, when we make paintings, we no longer use “black” but different colors. We must see different [kinds of] “black” in different . . . grays. There are countless grays divided from one original black source, [but each forms its own] “identity.” We read trees in green, flowers in red, mountains in yellow etc. for instance, but on actual paintings . . . they appear in black. It is [the] typical Chinese philosophy to “read” the world [in this way]. (September 3, 2014)

One may gather from Chen’s response that the various mixtures or dilutions of black ink account for the manner in which colors are seen. This was the great invention of the ink painters during the Northern Song period: to use ink in such a way that it contends with the space that breathes between the mountain peaks and thus renders time and infinity through illusions of color. But Chen is aware that the facture of acrylic is not ink and while linen may evoke royalty, it does not hold the grace of xuan paper, molded and spread from crushed mulberry leaves and elm bark. Even so, Chen observes—indeed, he knows—that when he moves across his fabric surfaces with his poignant blends of diluted color, something very special begins to happen. One glimpse at a triptych, such as *Untitled No. 53003 -14*, is enough to make clear that Chen inhabits the domain of his materials in order to evoke their feeling, to give them a monumental vastness, a space without measure. Chen realized long ago, at the outset of his journey into painting, a discovery whereby the mystic wave of ink became the means to transform the wetness of acrylic into something both ancient and fully modern at the same moment. He knew then that the space of the picture plane was not something given to him. Rather space is what the artist creates—a living, breathing space—that helps deliver what is miraculous in painting.

Robert C. Morgan is a critic, writer, and painter, an occasional visitor to China, and a teacher of students who enjoy the hidden rewards of art and conversation. He lives in New York City and in the Hudson River Valley.

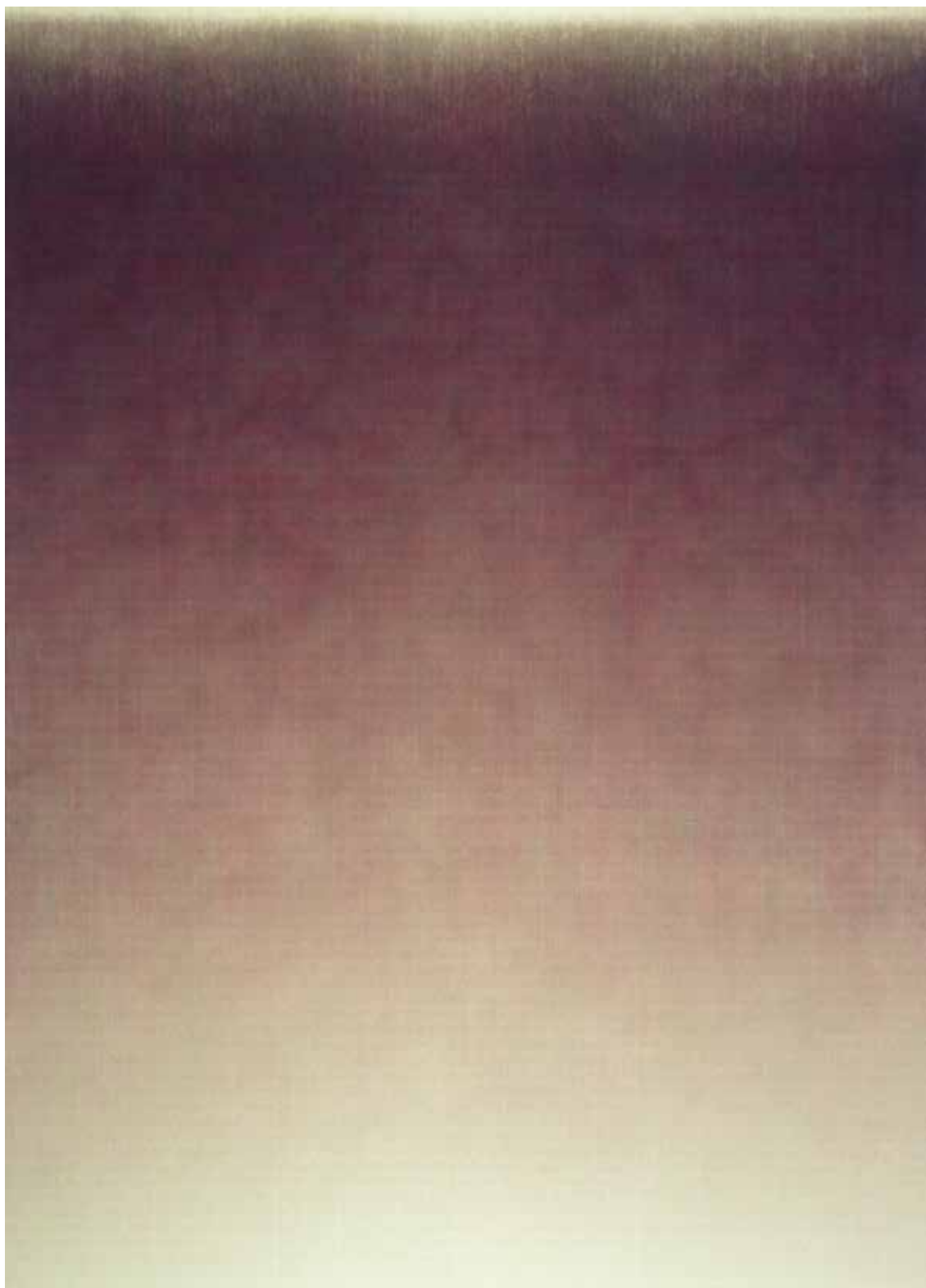
The recent exhibition “A Fragment in the Course of Time—Landscape of Chinese Ink Art in 1980s” at Himalaya Museum in Shanghai, brought my early ink paintings back to me, and provided me with the opportunity to look back on how I started my abstract painting. I had an artist-in-residence in Ghiffa, Italy this summer, and every day when I opened my studio window, my eyes were filled with the beautiful scene of Lake Maggiore. Sometimes the heavy rain made the mountain disappear. The way it disappeared was like the white open space left on Chinese ink paintings. It was the intense excitement I felt from the natural environment that inspired me to play with my ink again, first one drop, and then many drops. To play with the basic elements of my recent work—brush strokes—I layer them, and I play with time and space.

—*Shen Chen*







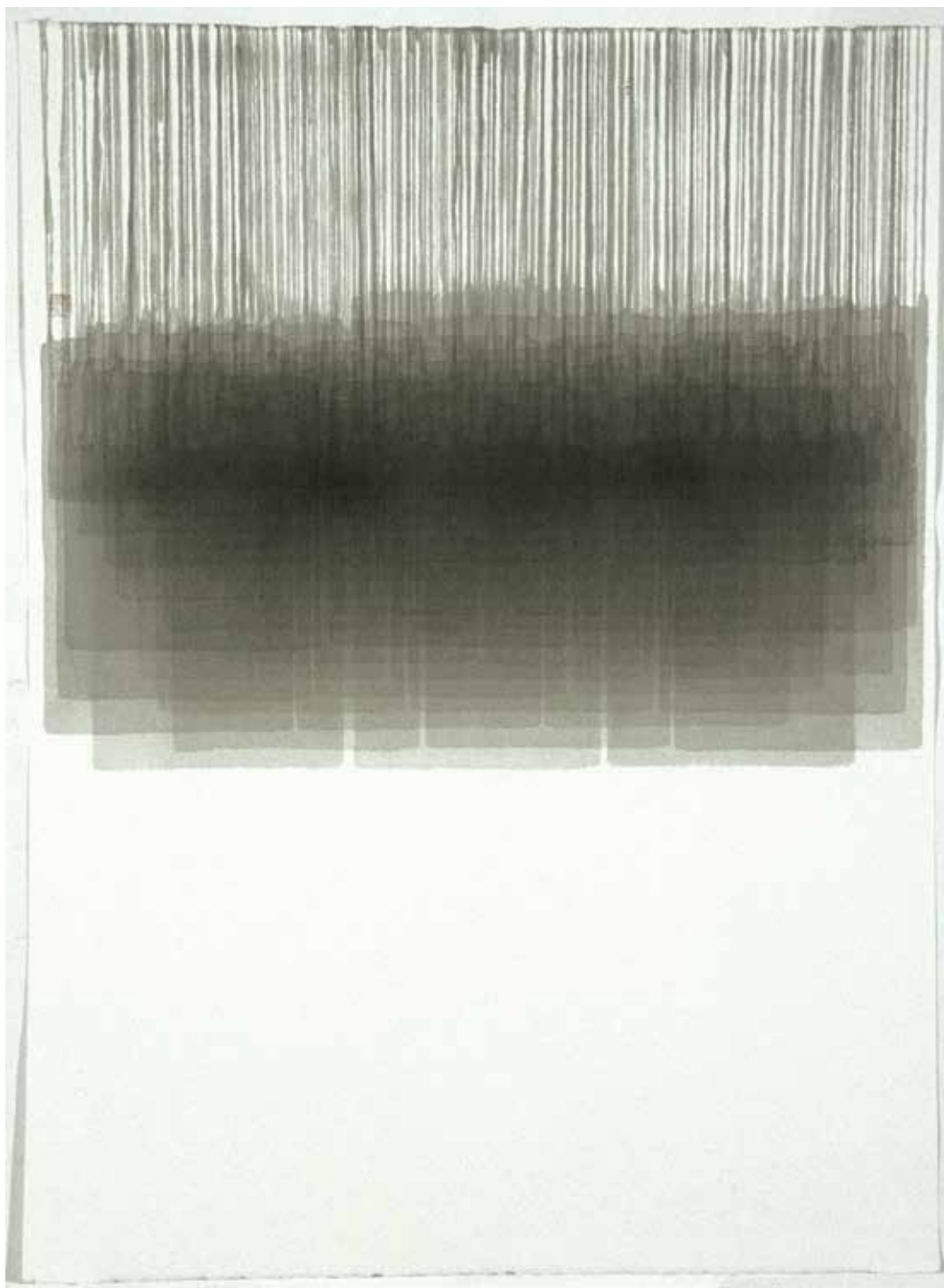




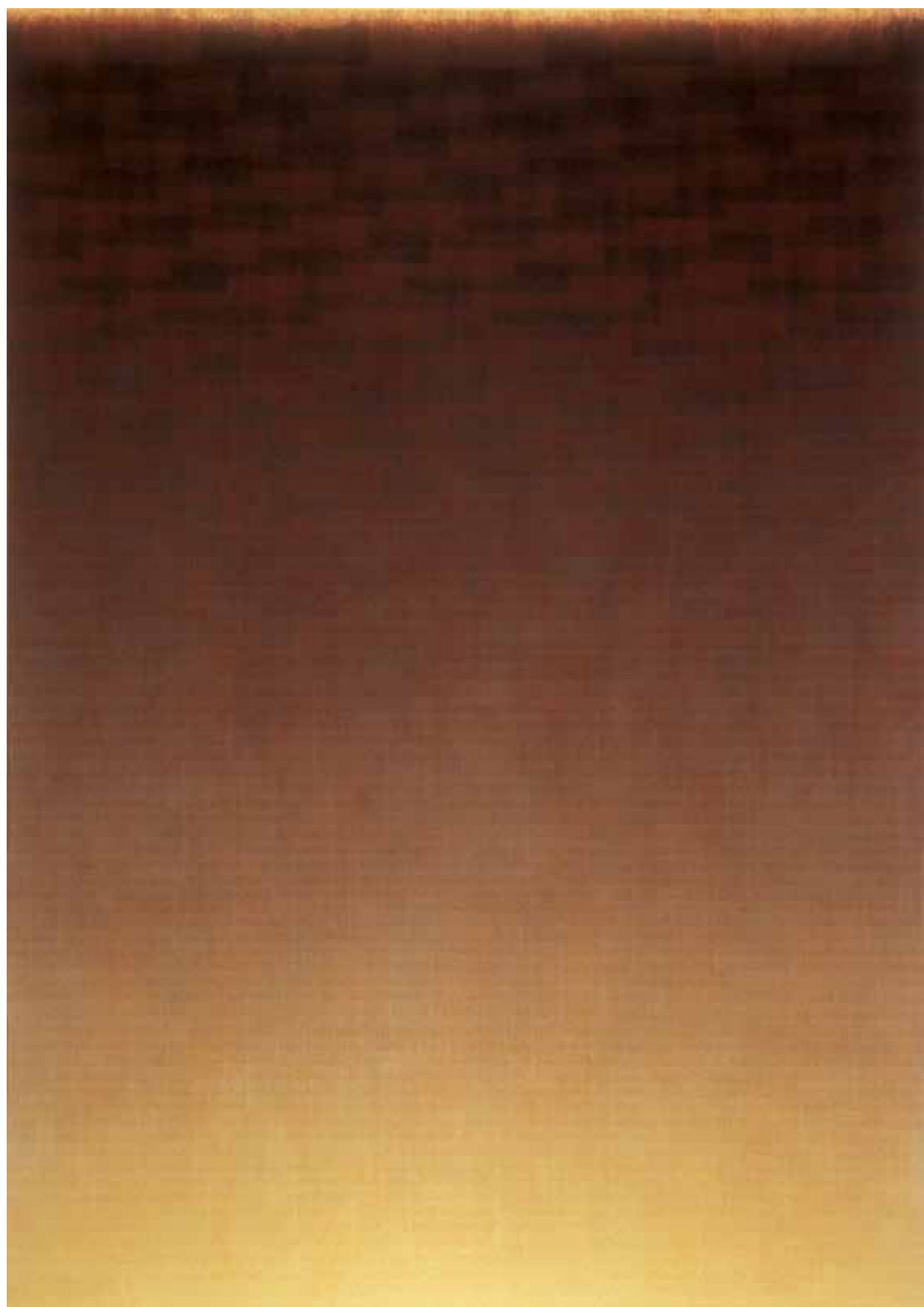


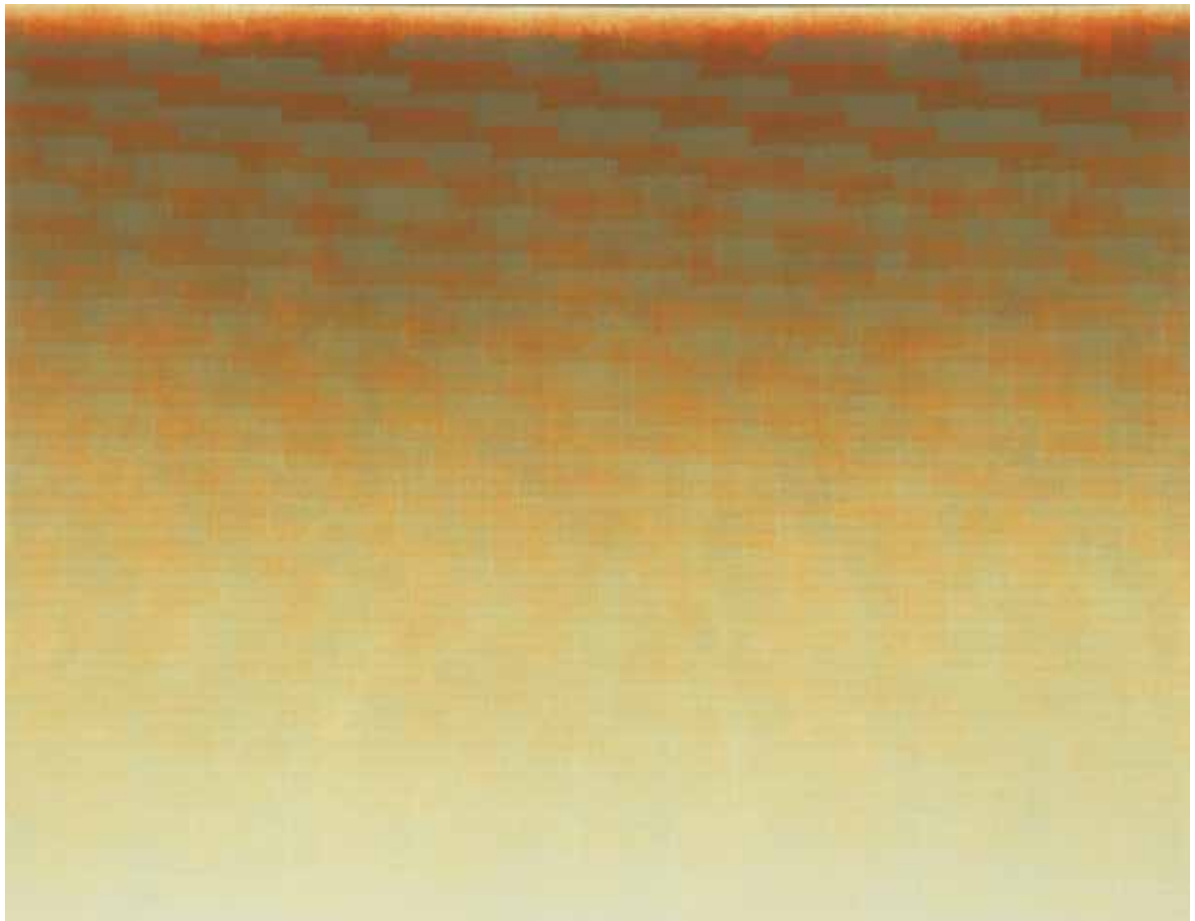


Untitled No.8027-14, 2014, ink on watercolor paper 30.25 x 22.75 inches



Untitled No.8028-14, 2014, ink on watercolor paper 30.25 x 22.25 inches





SHEN CHEN

b. 1955, Shanghai, China

EDUCATION

- 1990 MFA, Boston University, Massachusetts
- 1989 New York Studio School of Painting and Sculpture, New York
- 1988 Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Maine
- 1982 BFA, Shanghai Academy of Theater, Shanghai
- 1978 Shanghai Art College, Shanghai

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2014 *Shen Chen*, CYNTHIA-REEVES at Independent Art Projects, North Adams, MA, USA
Shen Chen Paintings, Galerie Frank Schlag, Essen, Germany
- 2013 *Between the Lines*, Canvas International Art, Amsterdam, the Netherlands
- 2012 *Shen Chen*, Elisabeth de Brabant Art Center, Shanghai, China
Shen Chen, CYNTHIA-REEVES New England, Hanover, NH, USA
Shen Chen, Galerie Frank Schlag, Essen, Germany
- 2011 *Shen Chen: Artworks from the Hangzhou Sanshang Museum*, Elisabeth de Brabant Art Center, Shanghai, China
- 2010 *Meteorology: Art of Shen Chen*, SanShang Museum of Contemporary Art, Hangzhou, China
Paintings by Shen Chen, Shanghai University Art Center, Shanghai, China
- 2009 *Shen Chen*, CYNTHIA-REEVES, New York, USA
- 2008 *Shen Chen*, Today Art Museum, Beijing, China
Void but Complete Pictures—Recent Works by Shen Chen, Nantong Art Museum, Jiangsu, China
Recent Works by Shen Chen, SanShang Art Museum, Beijing Gallery, Beijing, China
- 2006 *Shen Chen—Recent Paintings*, Gallery 456, New York, USA
- 1991 *Ink of China—Paintings by Shen Chen*, Mentor Gallery, VA, USA
- 1988 *Shen Chen, Paintings*, National Art Museum of China, Beijing, China
- 1987 *Abstract Ink Paintings by SHEN CHEN*, Beijing Gallery, Beijing, China
- 1986 *Ink Paintings by SHEN CHEN*, Ancient Observatory Gallery, Beijing, China
- 1985 *A Collection of Ink Paintings by SHEN CHEN*, Roma Academy of Fine Art, Rome, Italy
- 1984 *Fresh Experience—Abstract Ink Paintings by SHEN CHEN*, China Journalist Society, Beijing, China

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2014 *The Supremacy of Invisible—Chinese Abstract Paintings*, Museum Hurtle, Durbach, Germany
A Fragment in the Course of Time, Landscape of Chinese Ink Art in the 1980s, Himalayas Museum, Shanghai, China
Another Utopia, Abstract Art Shanghai, Mingyuan Museum, Shanghai, China
Downtown Art Fair, CYNTHIA-REEVES, New York, USA
- 2013 *The Solo Project*, CYNTHIA-REEVES, Basel, Switzerland
Art Basel, Canvas International Art, Basel, Switzerland
Art Rotterdam, Canvas International Art, Basel, Switzerland
Art13 London, CYNTHIA-REEVES, London, United Kingdom

- Asian Contemporary Art from China, Japan and Korea*, Galerie Frank Schlag, Essen, Germany
Art Wynwood International Contemporary Art Fair, CYNTHIA-REEVES, Miami, USA
 2012 *Germany/China Abstract Painting Today*, Wilo Art Foundation, Dortmund, Germany
Germany/China Abstract Painting Today, Wile Art Foundation, Beijing, China
artMRKT San Francisco, CYNTHIA-REEVES, San Francisco, USA
Chinese Abstract (Slow) Art, Kunsthalle Recklinghausen, Recklinghausen, Germany
Art Zurich, Galerie Frank Schlag, Zurich, Switzerland
 2011 *Buddha's Trace*, Kuntsmuseum Bochum, Bochum, Germany
Chinese Abstract Slow Art, Singer Laren Museum, the Netherlands
SOFA New York, CYNTHIA-REEVES, New York, USA
China Abstract Painting Now, Galerie Frank Schlag, Essen, Germany
artMRKT San Francisco, CYNTHIA-REEVES, San Francisco, USA
TX Contemporary, CYNTHIA-REEVES, Houston, USA
Breathing, Sylvia Wald & Po Kim Art Foundation Gallery, New York, USA
 2010 *Here & Now: Chapter III Towards Transculturalism*, Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA), New York, USA
Coincidental Opposites, Causey Contemporary, Brooklyn, NY, USA
Art Miami International Contemporary & Modern Art Fair, CYNHTIA-REEVES, Miami, USA
 2009 *Contemporary Ink Painting*, Doulon Museum of Modern Art, Shanghai, China
How Chinese, Gallery 456, New York, USA
Remembering How the Air Shimmers- Abstract Art by Three artists, 1918 Art Space, Shanghai, China
The Power of Contemporary Chinese Abstraction, Macau Museum of Art, Macau
Re-exam Modernism, Xi Hu Museum of Art, Zhejiang, China
 2008 *Turn to Abstract—A Retrospective of Shanghai Experimental Art 1976-1985*, Zhendai Museum of Modern Art, Shanghai, China
Quiet Quest: Realism to Abstraction—An Exhibition of Chinese Abstraction 2, One Moon Gallery, Beijing, China
Works by Three Artists, East Link Gallery, Shanghai, China
Qi Yun—An International Traveling Exhibition of Chinese Abstraction 2, China Square Gallery, New York, USA
Art Beijing, One Moon Gallery, National Agricultural Exhibition Center, Beijing, China
 2007 *Qi Yun-An International Traveling Exhibition of Chinese Abstraction 1*, Hexiangning Museum, OCT Contemporary Art Terminal, Shenzhen; Art Now Gallery, Beijing, Hanart TZ Gallery, Artist Commune, Hong Kong, China
Asian Contemporary Art Fare, China Square Gallery, New York, USA/SanShang Gallery, Beijing, China
Echoes & Reflections, China Square, New York, USA
Art Beijing, One Moon Gallery, National Agricultural Exhibition Center, Beijing, China
 2006 *Queens International*, Queens Museum of Art, Queens, NY, USA
International Modern Ink Painting, Asian Cultural Center, New York, USA
New Chinese Occidentalism—Chinese Contemporary Art in New York, Ethan Cohen Gallery, New York, USA
 2005 *Simplicity*, Crystal Art Foundation, New York, USA
The Art Ville, Two Times Thirteen Gallery, New York, USA
 2003 *Between the Lines*, China 2000 Fine Art Gallery, New York, USA
Creations on Paper by Chinese Contemporary Artists, China 2000 Fine Art Gallery, New York, USA
 1998 *Skowhegan Alumni Exhibition*, David Beitzel Gallery, New York, USA

- 1995 *Pacific Artists in New York*, New World Arts Center, New York, USA
 1993 *Paintings by Three Contemporary Chinese Artists*, Avatar Gallery, Chicago, USA
 1990 *Contemporary Chinese Paintings*, Muse Gallery, Boston, USA
 41' *Salon Jeune Peinture 1990*, Grand Palais, Paris, France
 1989 *Beijing - New York, Contemporary Chinese & American Art II*, Nielsen Gallery, Boston, USA
 1988 *Beijing-New York, Contemporary Chinese & American Art I*, Snug Harbor Cultural Center, New York, USA
 1986 *Grand Exhibition—Youth Artists*, China National Museum of Art, Beijing, China
Paintings by Eight Artists, Zhongshan Park Gallery, Beijing, China
 1982 *Annual Exhibition—Oil Paintings*, Shanghai Museum of Art, Shanghai, China
 1981 *Art of Youth Artists*, Youth Palace, Shanghai, China
New Paintings, Ningbo Museum of Art, Zhejiang, China
 1980 *Watercolor and Gouache Paintings*, Circuit Exhibition in Six Provinces, Shanghai Museum of Art, Nanjing art Museum, Guangzhou Museum of Art, China
 1979 *Annual Art Exhibition*, Shanghai Museum of Art, Shanghai, China
 1978 *Wild Rose—An Exhibition of Experimental Art*, Shanghai Academy of Theater, Shanghai, China

COLLECTIONS

ME Collection, Germany
 Shanghai University, China
 San Shang Museum of Contemporary Art, Zhejiang, China
 Nantong Art Museum, Jiangsu, China
 Today Art Museum, Beijing, China
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 2013 Robert C. Morgan, Essay, *Illuminating the Invisible: Shen Chen's Recent Painting*, Exh Cat, English/Dutch, Canvas International Art, Amsterdam, the Netherland
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 Ian Yang, *Interview with Shen Chen-Interview beyond Interview, Between the Lines*, Exh Cat. English/Dutch, Canvas International Art, Amsterdam, the Netherland

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SHEN CHEN

RECENT PAINTINGS

SEPTEMBER 25–NOVEMBER 30 2014

An Exhibition by CYNTHIA-REEVES

at Independent Art Projects

1315 Mass MoCA Way,

North Adams, MA 01247

independentartprojects.com



The artist and the writer