

Symbols and Experience: Dimensional Innovation of Ink Art in the Contemporary Context

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Abstract

Driven by the wave of globalization, ink art has transcended the limitations of traditional single-medium practices and entered the boundless realm of "post-medium culture." This interdisciplinary and experimental exploration has injected unprecedented vitality into ink art, transforming it into a richer and more diverse form of expression. In the process of artistic innovation, contemporary ink artists deeply explore the symbolic language of traditional ink and seamlessly integrate it with the concepts and perspectives of modern art. They not only investigate the intersection of Eastern philosophical thought and the global modern cultural landscape but also strive to create a unique artistic language through this collision. From innovative material applications to profound conceptual exploration, these artists continually push the boundaries of ink art. While preserving the essence of tradition, artists utilize multidimensional creative approaches to achieve the contemporary transformation of ink art. Whether through digital technology or installation art, they explore new spaces for expression. This diverse experimentation not only breaks regional boundaries but also builds new bridges for international cultural dialogue, demonstrating the infinite possibilities of ink art in a contemporary context.

1. Introduction

Ink installations and ink-based imagery represent essential extensions of contemporary ink art. The contemporary demand for formalization in art aims to expand the field of ink art and promote its conceptual globalization. The strength of ink installations and imagery lies in their intellectual depth and clear spiritual orientation, prompting reflections on realities beyond the surface. From another perspective, changes in artistic forms significantly influence the contemporary expression of ink art.

As noted by Cai Guangbin (2014), "Contemporary ink art can be seen as a precursor and development of ink-based thought. However, in its creative concepts and forms of expression, it exhibits more complex and diverse experimental characteristics. Contemporary ink artists strive to reposition the value of traditional Chinese cultural elements and the spirit of Chinese art within a globalized context" American contemporary art critic Rosalind Krauss (1999) introduced the term "post-medium," asserting that "contemporary art media are no longer pure, independent, or singular, but instead interpenetrate with other media, better exploring their potential through heterogeneity, entering what she terms the 'post-medium condition'" (*Critical Inquiry*, 25(2),

289–305). The value and significance of the artistic form of "ink combined with installation" vary depending on individual cases, leading to diverse evaluation standards. Its complexity makes it challenging to assess using a unified criterion. However, certain issues inherent in this art form have become increasingly apparent: it adopts a compromise-driven discursive strategy, resulting in a lack of conceptual thoroughness and coherence, thereby partially undermining the essential significance of its conceptual art nature.

The core concept of "ready-mades," fundamental to installation art, is often overlooked by creators of such works, severing the close connection between the artwork and social life. Additionally, a prevalent tendency toward formalism in these creations—where some artists remain immersed in the "ink game"—further diminishes the artistic tension of the works. At the heart of this transformation lies the need for a complete liberation of thought: to break free from the cognitive constraints of "ink" with the determination of a phoenix reborn from its ashes, allowing traditional ink art to undergo a conceptual "death" and thus achieve a new life. It has been proven that such a radical conceptual breakthrough is the only viable path for traditional ink art to enter the contemporary context, representing a critical turning point in the modern transformation of Chinese traditional art.

In the realm of art, ink has been utilized in various forms to create symbols and installations that offer a dimensional experience to viewers. The art of tattooing, explored by (Sanders, 1989), has evolved over time, with a new chapter focusing on the changes in the tattoo world. Despite the prevalence of tattoos in society, there remains a stigma associated with individuals who choose to ink their bodies. (Leung et. al., 2008) discuss the preservation of archaic Chinese calligraphic images through the estimation of three-dimensional geometric and ink model parameters, highlighting the intricate properties of brush hair and ink deposition. (Shen, 2014) presents a project that utilizes 3D animation to simulate Chinese ink painting, aiming to introduce traditional methods to a wider audience. (Catcher, 2014) delves into the nuances of ink application in Chinese stone rubbings, emphasizing the intensity of tones achieved through various techniques. In the realm of technology and art, (Zhang et. al., 2019) and (Kim et. al., 2019) explore the use of 3D printing in creating electronics and metamaterial absorbers, respectively. (Li, 2020) examines the two-dimensional quality in early installation art by Chinese artists, highlighting distinct aesthetic strategies and theatrical possibilities. (Han, 2020) discusses the innovative application of Chinese ink image representation techniques in VR animation design, showcasing the expansion of traditional art into new technological realms. (Shahzad et. al., 2021) focus on Direct Ink Writing (DIW) of structural and functional ceramics, highlighting recent achievements and future challenges in this field. Lastly, (Zhou et. al., 2023) explore the use of AI to reproduce the experience of Chinese literati ink paintings, emphasizing motion in nature, memories, and interactive appreciation to raise awareness of cultural heritage.

2.The Spiritual Orientation of the Three-Dimensional Transformation of Ink Symbols

As an art form, "ink" has transcended the inherent boundaries of traditional media throughout its evolutionary trajectory, gradually establishing an independent cultural status and becoming a symbol with artistic value. Here, the term "ink" (水墨) is employed not merely as a noun but as a verb—or more specifically, in the present continuous tense, implying "being in the process." The technical aspects of ink itself are no longer of primary importance; rather, our focus lies in its relationship to what follows—namely, the dynamic relationship between the present and the past. This dynamic and its inherent uncertainty may help us avoid falling into the trap of "folklorism" during the localization process of contemporary art.

As Wei Qingji (2003) observes, "Impermanence, or uncertainty," these qualities can provide a framework for understanding ink art's ongoing evolution. Over the past three decades, the understanding and positioning of "ink" within Chinese contemporary art have undergone significant changes. These changes reflect shifts in China's self-positioning and cultural identity against the backdrop of globalization. Traditionally, Chinese painting was often regarded as a

"counter-traditional" response to the influence of Western modern art, as well as an expression of the pursuit of modernity. However, over time, the concept of ink has moved beyond the confines of a mere painting genre, evolving into a broader cultural symbol. This transformation signifies a profound rethinking and repositioning of cultural identity within the Chinese contemporary art community. In this process of transformation, artists have consistently sought to explore the essence of issues within the contemporary cultural context, using this as a foundation to envision the future trajectory of ink art. Notably, during this exploration, artists have inadvertently expanded the traditional concept of "ink painting" into a more inclusive notion of "ink art." This shift in perception is reflected not only in numerous exhibition practices but also in gaining widespread theoretical consensus, marking a new stage in the evolution of ink art.

The transition of ink art from traditional two-dimensional surfaces to three-dimensional spaces represents not merely a formal innovation but also a reinterpretation of the spirit of Chinese traditional art and its self-positioning within the contemporary artistic context. Artists have liberated ink from the confines of the traditional "ink painting" concept, approaching it as a pure medium and exploring its potential from a modernist perspective. This endeavor has unleashed the vast expressive power of ink and opened up new possibilities for its development in the contemporary context. In contemporary artistic creation, a deep understanding and innovative application of materials have become increasingly important. As a unique cultural symbol and artistic medium, ink not only embodies the traditional spirit of Chinese art but also serves as a crucial carrier for expressing the contemporary spiritual state of the Chinese people. As Zhang Yu emphasized, "Artists should directly engage with the expression and construction of contemporary art rather than limiting themselves to the expressive methods of a specific medium" (Han & Duan, 2010). This perspective underscores that the essence of artistic creation lies in the expression of the artist's unique viewpoint, with the choice of medium serving this overarching goal. In this process, ink ceases to be merely a traditional painting technique and becomes a broader cultural symbol capable of conveying more complex contemporary artistic expressions. Through innovative use of ink materials and techniques, artists continually explore how to create works that retain their cultural roots while achieving contemporary significance. This practice not only enriches the expressive forms of ink art but also provides a unique perspective and methodology for cultural exchange between China and the globalized world. In doing so, ink art becomes a crucial bridge connecting tradition and modernity, East and West, showcasing the distinct voice and contributions of Chinese artists on the contemporary art stage.

3.The Experiential Elevation of Ink Symbols in Practice

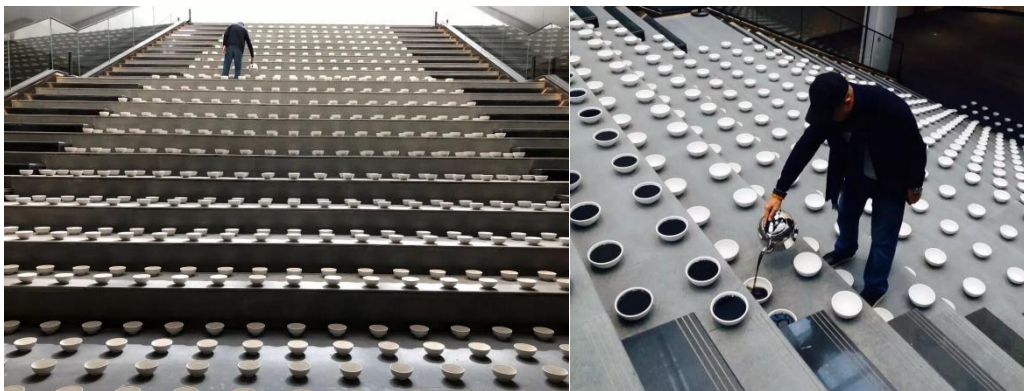
Whether in the pre-19th century or the 20th century, the ultimate focus of philosophical and artistic exploration has always revolved around "ideas" and their forms, as well as the epistemology grounded upon them. In a certain sense, the formal expression of ink painting can be seen as a "trace of ideas." This is because Chinese painting utilizes a refined and intricate system of ideographic language characterized by tools such as the brush, xuan paper, and ink. Within the tradition of Chinese painting, the concept of "ideas" serves as an implicit force guiding the movement of the brush. It directs not only the traces and strokes of the imagery but also embodies an instantaneous flow of qi (vital energy) and rhythm. Zhang Yu's artistic practice exemplifies the depth and breadth of this process. Beginning with addressing contemporary art issues through the medium of ink, he transitioned to examining ink-related issues from a contemporary art perspective, and ultimately transcended the medium of ink itself, shifting his focus to the construction of personal concepts and methodologies. This process of reflection and practice mirrors how Chinese artists, within the context of globalization, reexamine their cultural traditions and strive to find modes of expression that enable dialogue with international art. While the movement of "Experimental Ink" has subsided, leading many artists back to their personal creative pursuits, Zhang Yu did not cease his inquiry. If his early efforts used ink to engage with contemporary art issues, over time, his inquiry advanced to a point where he began to critique the significance of ink-related issues from the perspective of contemporary art. When individual

concepts, methodological construction, and self-expression became central, ink—as a medium—naturally lost its significance. Eventually, Zhang Yu announced his departure from ink. In fact, as early as his "Fingerprints" phase, Zhang Yu had effectively abandoned the ink medium.

Zhang Yu's work *Applying Ink—A Ritual*, forms a crucial part of his *Applying Water* series. As the artist explained, "In fact, the concept of *Applying Ink* originated from my creative method during the *Fingerprints* phase. In the initial stage, I would dip my fingers in ink and press them onto xuan paper, calling it *Applying Ink*, while dipping them in water was termed *Applying Water*. Later, I presented different iterations of the *Applying Ink* and *Applying Water* works based on this concept." This piece explores, in a distinctive manner, the significance and limitations of ink symbols within the context of contemporary art. (Figure 1.1)

With the interaction of water vapor and ink on xuan paper, as well as the subtle transformations occurring between the paper and the hundreds of bowls present on-site, this work minimizes the state of intentionality and action. Chan (Zen) Buddhism emphasizes "self-nature," where all intentionality arises inherently rather than dependently on external forces. By retreating intention into a state of "emptiness," the piece realizes a conceptual state of merging between water vapor, ink vapor, and xuan paper. This invisible relationship begins with *Fingerprints*, transitioning Zhang Yu's work from conceptually driven image creation to plane works rooted in intentional action, effectively breaking away from the category of painting. While ostensibly using materials associated with ink art, *Applying Ink—A Ritual* detaches action from a direct relationship with xuan paper. The relationship between ink/water and paper becomes invisible, and Zhang Yu emphasizes that this work, in fact, has no connection to traditional ink art but instead establishes a new cognitive system. The piece incorporates all the ritualistic elements related to art—space, presentation, and form. Within this prescribed framework, the dispersion of "ink/water" becomes a non-artistic physical process, resembling an invisible physical form of intention.

Through the cyclic processes of tea pouring, evaporation, and re-pouring, the work presents various transformative states of water—from existence to non-existence, and back to existence—delving deeply into the Daoist and Buddhist philosophical notions of "being" and "non-being" in Chinese tradition. At the same time, it attempts to bridge the relationships between Chinese and Western philosophies and visual arts. During the exhibition *Ink or Not? Daxian and Zhang Yu's Art Exhibition*, Zhang Yu remarked, "The title of this exhibition is 'Ink or Not?' Through its outward form, I want to encourage the audience to reflect: Are Daxian's works ink? Are Zhang Yu's works ink? Perhaps neither is ink, but regardless of the answer, it prompts further thinking—does ink even matter?" (He, 2016). He argues that overemphasizing the role of medium risks neglecting the essence and spiritual connotation of artistic expression.



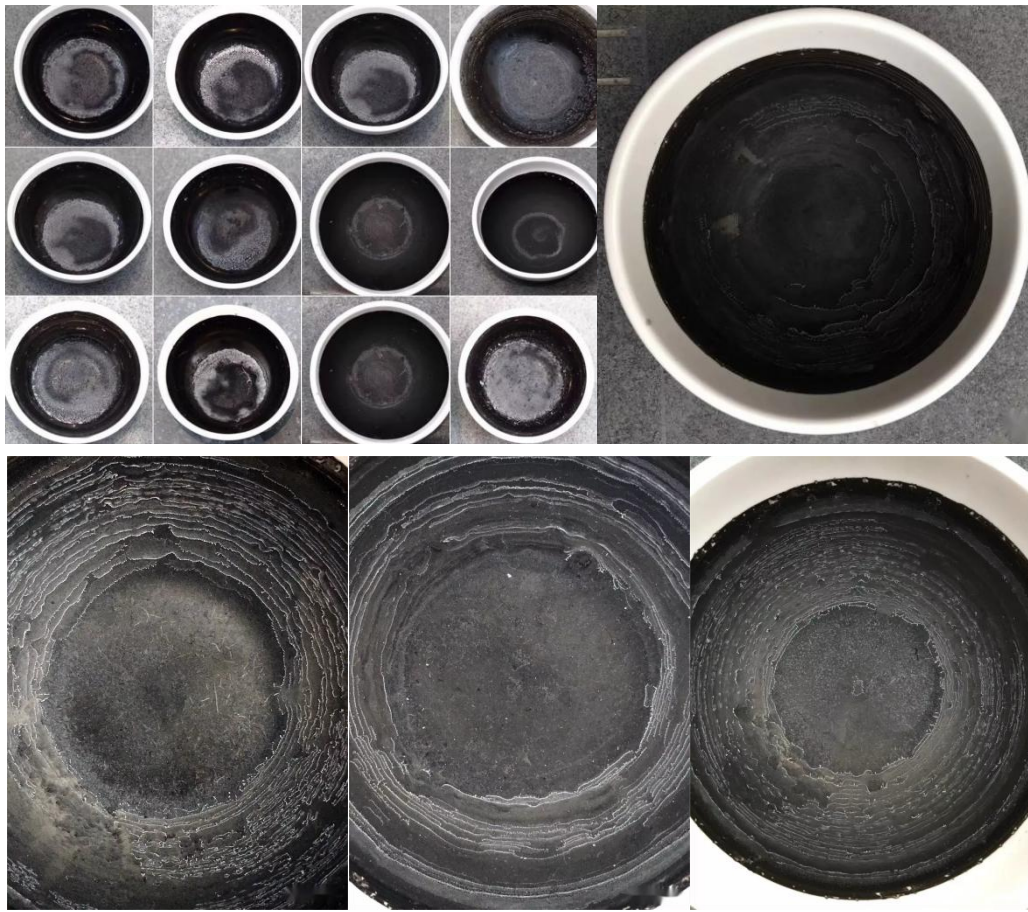


Figure 1.1 *Applying Ink*, October 18–December 26, 2017. Zhang Yu. Installation with 1,000 porcelain bowls, water, and ink. Performance installation.
Courtesy of Shanghai Baolong Art Museum.

The artwork *Applying Ink: A Cleansing Action Performed with Ink and Water* continues the artist's exploration of the "Applying Tea" concept. At this moment, "Applying Ink" is presented as a "cleansing action," expressed through a progression from performance to installation and finally to a plane-based format. In this performance, Zhang Yu selected newspapers—a ready-made object—as the medium. By immersing them in ink and water through the performative action of "applying," he enacted a process of "cleansing" the ready-made material. The result of this "cleansing" was the transformation of newspapers into flat, inked ready-made artworks. This so-called "cleansing action" does not rely on the physical act of washing but rather on the process of "soaking." However, "soaking" itself transcends the literal action or effect and becomes a conceptual notion of "cleansing." Zhang Yu further notes that the choice of newspapers as a medium is significant. Newspapers, once an essential part of daily life for the general public, were the most widespread and influential form of mass communication. They contained vast amounts of information, from global and societal news to commercial advertisements, making them a primary platform for public engagement with current events and information. Reading newspapers was an indispensable daily activity for many (Figure 2.1).

With the evolution of society, newspapers have become more diverse, their content increasingly abundant, particularly with the proliferation of advertisements—some beneficial, others misleading, blending truth with falsehood. Thus, "cleansing" can be understood as a form of social responsibility, an act of disinfection. The act of "cleansing" newspapers with ink and water serves as an artistic method, using "water + ink" to cover the text—or "information"—on the paper. This process renders the text partially visible, disrupting the clarity of information and the act of reading itself. Its expression is simple, accessible, clear, and rational (Zhang, 2019).

From the action, materials, and the spatial flow of qi, everything revolves around the act of

"applying ink" through the combination of "water + ink." This process represents an unrestrained spread and penetration over the surface of newspapers. Such "cleansing" is not merely a physical act but also a critical reflection on and response to social realities. By soaking newspapers in ink and water, the text and images on the pages are suspended between states of visibility and invisibility, creating a unique artistic expression that symbolically reconstructs and critiques information. Through this act of "cleansing" newspapers, Zhang Yu seeks to provoke the audience to reflect on the authenticity of information, social responsibility, and the hidden issues in daily life.



Figure 2.1 Applying Ink: A Cleansing Action Performed with Ink and Water, 2017–2018. Zhang Yu. Acrylic boxes, ready-made newspapers (Nanjing Daily), ink, and water. Performance installation. Courtesy of Nanjing Normal University Art Museum.

In the context of globalization, Zhang Yu keenly recognized that ink painting, as an art medium with distinct regional characteristics, faces certain limitations in its universality. Rooted deeply in traditional Chinese culture, ink art often proves challenging for Western audiences to fully comprehend and embrace from a global perspective. Acknowledging this, Zhang Yu, through his series of works and his in-depth exploration of the contemporary value of ink art, seeks to transcend the limitations of the medium itself and address the fundamental relationship between the essence of art and modes of expression. He emphasizes that merely using ink-related materials does not equate to a genuine engagement with the essence of ink art. Furthermore, viewing ink as the sole pathway for Chinese art to engage with the world is, in his view, a one-dimensional understanding. For Zhang Yu, the core of artistic creation lies in the spiritual depth and philosophical reflection it embodies, rather than the medium itself. This profound artistic perspective not only challenges the established boundaries of traditional ink art but also opens up new dimensions for the development of Chinese contemporary art within a global context. It reflects the artist's unique insights into contemporary artistic creation and cross-cultural exchange.

From the late 1980s to the 1990s, practices related to "ink" and the conceptual vocabulary associated with it experienced an explosive growth. It seemed that overnight, artists across China began experimenting with splashed ink, experimental ink painting, and experimental calligraphy. Amid this fervent atmosphere of artistic experimentation, Wang Tiande created his seminal work *Ink Menu* in 1996, a landmark piece that boldly innovated and challenged the traditions of ink art. This work originated from the fundamental proposition of the "cultural dining table," associated with the Eastern perspective of existence encapsulated in the saying "food is the paramount necessity of the people." The core innovation of this work lies in its expansion of ink art from two-dimensional planes to three-dimensional spaces. Wang meticulously wrapped a round dining table and tableware—including traditional Chinese porcelain bowls, plates, and spoons, as well as Western-introduced glass bottles, wine glasses, and chairs—with xuan paper stained in ink. On the table, he placed menus transformed from ancient poetry collections, adorned with vermilion "imperial critiques" reminiscent of an emperor's annotations. Freshly crafted calligraphy brushes served as chopsticks, and he applied abstract ink techniques, combining brushing and splashing, to transform these everyday items into cultural symbols (Figure 3.1).

Wang inscribed cooking terminology in vermilion ink around the borders of the ancient poetry collections, creating a humorous juxtaposition between the traditional cultural backdrop of ink art and the unconventional pairing of menus and feasts. As described: "One may immerse oneself in the vastness of traditional Chinese ink's ancient atmosphere or traverse the globe in the information age. In your eyes lies a vision that ancient people could not have possessed; in your veins flows a pulse transcending time. As for works like *Chinese Fans*, *Ink Menu*, *Chinese Clothing*, *Coal Hill*, or *Ink Equals Zero*—form is always just a starting point for the expression of concepts." (Xu, 2011). In his innovative exploration of ink art, Wang Tiande successfully constructed a distinctive visual language. His works present a subversive visual landscape, employing metaphorical expressions to create subtle tensions between the familiar and the unfamiliar. While breaking away from traditional brush-and-ink techniques in terms of medium, they skillfully preserve the aesthetic essence and resonance of traditional ink art. This characteristic is exemplified in his *Ink Menu* series, which not only challenges the established rules and boundaries of ink art but also represents one of the most groundbreaking achievements in ink art exploration since the 1980s.



Figure 3.1 *Ink Menu*, 1996–1998. Wang Tiande. Xuan paper, ink, Republican-era chairs, calligraphy brushes, and Republican-era poetry collections. Installation. Courtesy of CAFA Art Info.

Recently, Wang Tiande revisited his iconic work *Ink Menu* from thirty years ago, creating a reinterpretation that goes beyond a simple historical reflection or nostalgic expression. This new creative endeavor, *Ink Menu 2024 Edition*, reflects a dual-dimensional transformation, offering a unique perspective on the development of contemporary ink art. Examining the artistic context of the 1990s reveals a period of complexity and contradiction. With profound changes in China's economic system and the gradual infiltration of international art capital, Chinese ink art displayed a hybridized state. This hybridity was an inevitable phase in China's modernization process, yet it also highlighted the profound dilemmas ink art faced when addressing two core issues: its relationship with the West and with tradition. Despite extensive theoretical discussions on ink art, these fundamental issues have remained unresolved. Within this context, binary themes such as East versus West, tradition versus modernity, and center versus other proliferated (Figure 4.1).

Art critic Huang Zhuan astutely noted that the core challenge for Chinese painting in the 1990s lay in overcoming the conceptual constraints of "ontology" and "medium." The former viewed Chinese painting as a self-contained system of meaning and language, while the latter reduced it to a medium within the history of Western contemporary art. Within this framework, Wang Tiande's *Ink Menu* represented a groundbreaking attempt, breaking free from the limitations of medium-based and formalist thinking. By localizing ink art and elevating it to the conceptual realm, the work paved new paths for exploration. However, the advent of new technologies is disrupting this "closed loop." Revolutionary technologies such as the internet, artificial intelligence, and genetic engineering are not only altering humanity's interaction with the real world but are also fundamentally reshaping societal structures. In this technology-driven era, the creative scope and discourse of ink art must undergo profound transformations to address these new existential questions. Such change demands breaking out of the existing artistic "closed loop" and finding new entry points in the intertwined realms of the virtual and the real, opening up new possibilities for the future of ink art.

From the psychological state of the creators to their forms of expression, Chinese art in the 1990s still bore the deep imprint of the intellectual cultural movements of the 1980s. During this period, artists often took on the role of researchers, delving deeply into Western modern art, reflecting on mainstream art systems, and seeking to dismantle their mythologized status. This creative posture was marked by a strong sense of destruction and opposition, resulting in a distinctly critical character. Wang Tiande's *Ink Menu* (1996 edition) fully embodied this trait: the deliberate application of ink to wrap Chinese dining tables and tableware, the symbolic substitution of calligraphy brushes for chopsticks, and the transformation of ancient poetry collections into "menus" decorated with vermilion imperial critiques constructed a visual space rich in cultural and power metaphors. Nearly thirty years later, the *Ink Menu 2024 Edition* exhibits an entirely different artistic sensibility. Vibrant, colorful wine bottles leap like musical

notes in harmony with rustic Chinese wine jars, weaving a whimsical scene of fusion between the ancient and the modern. This transformation reflects the broader evolution of Wang Tiande's creative philosophy after 2020: the artist has gradually abandoned the solemn posture of grand narratives, turning instead to the subtle connections between people and life. His focus now rests on intimate realms such as everyday life, emotional resonance, and familial and friendly relationships. In this shift, once-heavy artistic themes find lighter forms of expression, achieving a more relaxed yet profound artistic realm.



Figure 4.1 *Ink Menu 2024 Edition A, 2024. Wang Tiande. Xuan paper, ink, Republican-era chairs, calligraphy brushes. Installation. Exhibition view from After—The Art of Wang Tiande.*

Wang Tiande's creations extend beyond formal innovation to delve deeply into the conceptual realm. He transforms the "language" of ink into a "method," using it to address all aspects of everyday life experiences. On a conceptual level, this approach alleviates the disconnect between the language of ink and the realities of daily life. Through this transformation, ordinary affairs within the living space are converted into ink forms imbued with cultural meaning. Notably, Wang Tiande does not entirely separate his concepts from tradition. Instead, he stops at the edge of the language of ink, combining conceptual and linguistic expressions in a nuanced manner. His artistic personality does not adhere to fixed styles or themes but continuously evolves and explores. This indicates that he is both a conceptual artist and one deeply devoted to the language of ink. His understanding of ink transcends tradition, capturing the unique essence of ink as a linguistic entity and its potential for development within contemporary cultural contexts. Through this innovative mode of expression, Wang Tiande not only demonstrates a profound understanding of tradition but also offers new possibilities for the evolution of ink art in contemporary settings. His approach imbues ordinary objects of daily life with new artistic significance, creating vibrant, multi-dimensional spatial installations that surpass the two-dimensional limitations of traditional ink painting.

4. Conclusion

In the contemporary context, the concept of "ink" has undergone a profound transformation from a traditional medium to a dynamic cultural symbol. This transformative process is reflected not only in formal breakthroughs but also in contemporary artists' deep contemplation of the essence of the medium and the reconstruction of artistic concepts. Notably, this transition reveals two parallel developmental trajectories: one pushes ink toward conceptual extremities, ultimately transcending the medium itself to address the fundamental relationship between artistic essence and modes of expression; the other retains the linguistic qualities of ink while transforming it into a conceptual mode of expression, fostering an organic dialogue between tradition and contemporaneity.

This dual-pronged artistic practice profoundly reflects the journey of ink art's transformation within a globalized context—from its initial response to Western art, to a re-examination of tradition, and finally to the construction of a unique artistic language system. Particularly with the advent of the new technological era, ink art's creative vision and discourse face unprecedented

demands for transformation, whether through breaking the limitations of the medium or exploring its contemporary possibilities.

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