Tian Wei was born in Xi’an, a city which, over 2,000 years ago, was made the imperial capital by King Zheng of Qin (Qin Shi Huang), the man who ended the ‘Warring States’ period and created the single, unified, political amalgamation that has ever since been known as China. Qin Shi Huang’s capital became the starting point of the Silk Road, the route that for centuries linked East and West together in a complex network of trade and reciprocal exchange. An impressive symbol of this autocratic ruler’s power was unearthed, in 1974, when pottery fragments led to the discovery of a buried ‘terracotta army’ of more than 7,000 warriors, still dutifully guarding the First Emperor’s Mausoleum. His reign is also remembered by the four character idiomatic expression Fen Shu Keng Ru (Burning of Books and Burying of Scholars) because, in 213 B.C., he ordered the burning of all Confucian books, save for the copies preserved in the Imperial archives. Those not complying with this edict, were marched away to forced labour, building the Great Wall along the Empire’s northern border, where most will have perished. Besides entombing symbolic effigies of his fearsome army, the first Qin Emperor also buried alive over 400 scholars whom he suspected of questioning his policies. Thus steeped in the tumultuous histories of several successive dynasties, the city of Xi’an remains rich in

Lu Chai (Wang Kai) - 17th Century

‘If you aim to dispense with method - learn method
If you aim at facility - work hard
If you aim for simplicity - learn complexity’
museums today, amongst which is the renowned Xi’an Beilin Museum, whose ‘Stele Forest’ of commemorative inscriptions engraved in stone is the single most important repository of Tang dynasty calligraphy in the world.

Tian Wei was born in 1955, the eldest son of an educated man and a doctor who practised both western and traditional Chinese medicine. As a young boy he was tutored in a variety of subjects, including the time-honoured disciplines of art, calligraphy and classical poetry. He remembers many hours spent wandering amongst the calligraphic masterpieces displayed in the ‘Stele Forest.’ His own precocious talents as a calligrapher were recognised, in 1971, when his work was selected for the First Chinese Painting and Calligraphy Exhibition presented at the Shan’xi Museum in Xi’an, where he had the distinction of being the youngest participating artist.

In common with all those born after the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, it is impossible to understand Tian Wei’s development, either as individual or artist, without taking into account the historical forces moulding and continually reshaping the lives of all who lived through the upheavals transforming Chinese society in the latter part of the 20th century. As early as 1942, Mao Zedong had convened a three-week long forum at Yan’an, where he set out the prescribed role of ‘revolutionary literature and art.’ Alongside the Communist army with their guns, he called for the creation of ‘a cultural army, as something indispensable to uniting our ranks and defeating the enemy (Japanese).’ From Yan’an onwards the artist’s value to society would be judged along political lines.

Thus, Tian Wei grew up in an entirely different climate to that of his grandfather, where the ‘literati’ painters (wenrenhua) had over several centuries defined the most prestigious form of Chinese art as ink wash paintings (guohua) practised by gentlemanly scholars. The development of any proficiency in the delicate manipulation of ink and water on unsized paper using brushes required many years of concentrated application. Yet, in the 50s and 60s, ink painting, the cornerstone of Chinese art practice since the Song dynasty, was under serious threat. It was now viewed as an elitist bourgeois tradition in need of drastic reform, if not abandonment, in accordance with the revolutionary dictates of Maoist doctrine. The new teachings called upon artists to produce far more realistic depictions of the actual world of the proletarian workers. Although modern western art movements had been gradually filtering into China since the 20s, following ‘Liberation’ in ’49, the only authorised model for development
came from Soviet Socialist Realism, which prioritised oil painting on canvas (xihua), a radical break from the traditional Chinese forms of ink wash on paper. However, most of the heated debates contrasting the relative merits of these two opposing styles were quickly overtaken by events beginning in 1966 and continuing on for the next ten years.

Ironically, the Cultural Revolution, as it was known, was precipitated by a written text in a form soon to become indelibly linked with this decade of turmoil - the Big Character Poster (dazibao). A young Philosophy lecturer at Beijing University, Nie Yuanzi, displayed a poster criticising the University officials for being under the control of bourgeois counter-revolutionaries. Mao had her text read out over the radio, using it as a trigger to unleash the destructive frenzy of his young, over-zealous Red Guards. There followed a decade of denunciations and violent purges that destroyed hundreds of thousands of lives, ruined the Chinese economy and caused the outright destruction of the majority of China’s most prized cultural assets. Later that same year, Mao further sanctioned the dazibao form, when he published a short essay entitled ‘Bombard the Headquarters - My First Big Character Poster.’ In this, he identified a privileged elite of counter-revolutionaries concealed within

the Headquarters of the Communist Party itself, who were to be exposed and rooted out. Large propaganda posters referring to this essay were pasted up around the country, depicting the Party Chairman alertly poised to counter this internal threat - wielding an ink brush (or pen) in his right hand.

In 1966, Tian Wei was still a young student at school, but the urgent new requirements for those who could write well to engage in poster writing kept him fully occupied. He sees this as the start of his career as a calligrapher, remembering that he was much in demand because he was the only one 'able to write Chairman Mao’s poems in four different calligraphic styles.' Yet, because his grandfather, a scholar who had held a high position in government, had been discredited, he was unable to enter university until after the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, and restrictions were removed. Thus, in 1977, he pragmatically chose to study for a B.Sc. in the real-world subject of Engineering. It was only because a piece of his calligraphy had taken the Second Prize in a National Fine Arts Competition, that he was eventually able to join a two-year programme for professional artists at the Xi’an Fine Arts Academy. There, for the first time, he feverishly began to study western European painting, access to which had been restricted
In China for so many years. He knew that in order to widen his limited horizons and to make any real progress in developing his art, he would need open access to the source of these fresh ideas. In one interview he stated, ‘I felt that creativity needs freedom and learning demands resources; an artist needs museums and access to real art.’ So he applied to study for a graduate degree in America, before moving to Honolulu in 1986, to pursue his dream of studying art in the West. Upon completing his MFA in Hawaii in 1990, the year after the Tianamen Square protests, Tian Wei settled in Los Angeles, California, and, after many years of travelling and working in both America and China, he has based himself, since 2010, in Beijing.

Once abroad, Tian Wei immersed himself in the unfamiliar world of western art history – a world whose complexity he would never have been able to imagine had he not experienced it at first hand. Although Honolulu’s main art museum, the Honolulu Academy of Arts, had impressive collections of Chinese and Japanese masters, it was the works of the Impressionists and post-Impressionists that first drew his attention and which he avidly began to copy. Trips to New York and its many museums led to further discoveries: Rembrandt, Vermeer, Velasquez, Caravaggio – an unfolding list of painters, many hitherto unseen, from different places and times and each one of them using individual techniques from which there was much to learn. A survey of the art of those times yielded a confusing plethora of styles spawned by the post-war American explosion of Abstract Expressionism. Tian Wei’s early works in oil on canvas grappled with the attempt to find common ground between his inherited sense of a rigorously defined oriental line and the abstract idiom of the contemporary West. Once convinced that actual correspondences existed between these seemingly contrary states, his explorations became more nuanced, enabling the amalgamation of ideas from both sides of the oriental-occidental dichotomy and the exploitation of combinations of terms and forms adopted from either side.

Both theoretically and formally speaking, Tian Wei’s work constructs a bridge between things that appear to be polar opposites or complementary pairs. This dyadic way of seeing the world in pairs (think Yin and Yang) is deeply embedded in Chinese thinking, and the artist’s frequent reference to classic texts such as the I Ching and Tao Te Ching might appear as quotations in cursive script patterning the ground upon which larger semi-abstract shapes are drawn. ‘Taste’ (2005) provides one early example of this
pattern. Chinese characters selected from the Autobiography of Huai Su (737-799), a calligrapher monk famous for his ‘wild’ cursive script, appear as sinuous black lines twisting across a black ground. Instantly recognisable to most Chinese readers, this superlative expression of Tang calligraphic technique can only mean the exotic ‘other’ to western eyes. Bright red daubs of paint snake energetically across the background text, overwriting the past and asserting at least an equal right to prominence. Yet these animated strokes frustrate any attempts at interpretation by those familiar with Chinese writing. The breathtaking vigour of these angular brush-strokes, charged with their own vital energy, only becomes clear when one interprets the floating vermillion phantoms as English letters, written the Chinese way, and spelling out the English word ‘taste.’ It demonstrates abundant self-assurance, to yoke together Chinese sublimity and English taste, and to challenge the viewer, both eastern and western, to grapple with much more than they anticipated. To grasp the import of such works requires of the viewer a movement towards the understanding of a plurality of possibilities, the making of space for the existence of complementary – possibly opposing – yet equally coherent points of view.

The set of monochrome canvases in this current exhibition are of more recent vintage, having all been created since the artist returned to live and work in Beijing. In this oriental context the use of English words has instantly transformed and now becomes the exotic ‘other’. Here, both the background text of tiny words arranged in circular, geometric patterns spiralling towards the black hole of an event horizon in the centre of the canvas and the foreground cursive shapes are each written in English or Spanish, depending on the work. The foregrounded text announces the title word - be it a noun, an adjective or an entire phrase. Here the opposition between the poles is more subdued; the rich contrast of red upon black in ‘Taste’ has given way to monochromatic red upon red or black upon black canvases. One is reminded of the large flat expanses of ‘ultra-black’ canvases of Pierre Soulages, the French Abstract Expressionist, where the depth of application of thick, impastoed, angled strokes provides nuances of light and shade that serve in place of tonal contrast. With Tian Wei, the notional distinctions between foreground and background become those of style, tonal quality and depth. The uni-dimensional block-print of the gyrating background text contrasts with the gestural freedom of the thickly impastoed, forceful cursive scripts that seem to