Founded by artists, architects and adventurers from different places, October Gallery opened, in the centre of London, in 1979, intending to test the germ of a novel idea. As advanced as the so-called ‘avant-garde’ seemed to be, its absolute importance was persistently overstated in comparison to the arts of other traditions beyond the pale of the western canon. The early 20th century provided many telling examples of this self-serving tendency, as major western artists developed their modernist agendas by borrowing elements from African art whilst describing those African sources – their tutors, in fact - as ‘primitive’. In the multicultural metropolis of London this fertile interchange between the many cultures from around the planet is everywhere apparent. Over the years we met many artists from Africa, Asia, Australia and beyond, whose practice was profoundly rooted in their own cultures and, yet, who were simultaneously alive to recent advances at the forefront of the rapidly developing global artistic culture. The hybrid vigour of their collective creative strategies pushed the artistic boundaries forward on a planetary scale. Since the term ‘avant-garde’ itself was now associated with one particular period, and seemed only to apply to western artists, we began to refer to cutting-edge artists from around the planet as artists of the Transvangarde - that is to say, the trans-cultural avant-garde – and set out to search for others. In thirty-five years of expeditions around this extraordinary planet we met many like-minded friends, discovering a network of Transvangarde artists both nearby and in faraway places.

As chance would have it, 1979 also marked the beginnings of a ‘New Spring’ in the Chinese art world, the upwelling currents of what came to be called the ‘New Wave’. Yet a decade passed before, in 1989, the gestural abstractions in oils of Xi Jian Jun attracted our attention, and October Gallery gave a solo show to its first ever Chinese artist. Soon after, Xu Zhong Min’s arrival in England translated into a still closer relationship, and he became a firm favourite of the Gallery’s cultivated audience. By the end of the ‘90s, it was becoming clear that there were several divergent streams of Chinese artists: those still working within China, and those wild geese who, for a variety of reasons, had flown abroad and were establishing reputations in London, Paris, Honolulu, New York, etc. In 1997, to highlight this complex relationship between Chinese contemporary artists and the international art world, October Gallery presented an exhibition by Xu Zhong Min and Ye Yong Qing. Both artists had graduated from the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts, but each was now forging a quite different career in London and Chongqing respectively. Structured as a stimulating dialogue between two close friends, the show was provocatively titled Between Two Places, and examined the underlying question of what constituted Chinese art at that time, probing its dependence on identity and the crucial importance of place.

More recently, our maturing relationship with Chinese artists has broadened to include the large-scale photographic scans of Huang Xu and the ambivalent calligraphic explorations in impasto acrylics of Tian Wei. The former has always worked from Beijing, the latter, having established his credentials in the U.S., returned to China in 2011. As this century develops, under the new regime of free market forces, the Chinese art world becomes evermore integrated with the international art markets, and the majority of the overseas Chinese artists have now returned. Xu Zhong Min and Ye Yong Qing have both cemented their places as highly respected contemporary artists, and now judge Beijing as the optimal place from which to work.
When Philip Dodd introduced us to Wang Huangsheng, early in 2014, we were delighted for a variety of reasons. Here was someone who, as the Director of the prestigious Museum of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, was based at the core of the complex world of contemporary Chinese arts. A specialist, deeply grounded in the long traditions of Chinese painting, he was intimately familiar with the twists and turns that world has traversed over the last tumultuous decades, having experienced them, as an artist himself, at first-hand. But, most importantly, here was an artist whose own artwork bears the hallmark of that distinctive energy and passion that defines what is of most interest to us: work that refuses categorisation as either ‘Chinese’ or ‘western’, that eludes the restrictive claims of ‘traditional’ or ‘contemporary’, and that mocks the trite euphemism of ‘centres’ and ‘peripheries’. It is as though the ‘mighty river’ of Chinese art having been dammed and diverted and having disappeared from view for half a century, re-emerges broader, deeper and with undiminished power, from a new and unexpected quarter. Surely, it is in this sense, also, that we must understand this exhibition’s title. Despite the long diversionary march of recent times, the line of transmission - reaching back to the primal sources - holds firm and remains unbroken today.

Gerard Houghton, October Gallery, London
Tradition and the Individual Talent

By Philip Dodd  Chairman of Made in China

It is one of the most remarked-upon dimensions of twentieth century western art: its need to renew itself by appropriating art from outside its own traditions. What we have come to call postwar U.S. Abstract Expressionism went to Chinese calligraphy to find necessary resources, as has been well-documented by the recent Guggenheim exhibition *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia 1860-1989*. Artists such as Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell and Mark Tobey became absorbed by East Asian calligraphy, with its sense of order and control; its preoccupation with the brushstroke was borrowed by certain American artists as a way of engaging with the movements of their own body and their own inner workings. Or take Paul Klee and his nostrum that ‘Art does not reproduce the visible; it makes visible’. To make such an art, Klee had to go to the art of children and to that of outsiders to help him forge the necessary language.

Contrary to their western counterparts, contemporary artists from China do not necessarily find themselves in a crisis of relationship to their tradition, as is clear when I talk to Wang Huangsheng down a line from Beijing. He is someone I have known for seven or eight years, both as an artist and as one of the most influential curators and museums directors, first at Guangdong Art Museum and more recently at the Museum of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing.

His museum experience is relevant to the choices he has made as an artist, insofar as it has exposed him to installation art and to video - both of which he has practised. But his primary loyalty is to ink on paper, the basis of his show at the October Gallery, and the loyalty is a deliberate choice. And why - because of what the tradition of Chinese ink painting offers him as a *contemporary* artist. Wang Huangsheng’s art is the art of the line (compare Paul Klee’s much quoted aphorism that ‘drawing is taking a line for a walk’) and when I ask him what the line means to him, he does not hesitate.

For him the line is ‘a mark of universal recognition’; it also articulates ‘spiritual freedom’ but also, and here he is insistent, it is freighted with the power and resonance that China’s long tradition of calligraphy gives it. ‘Calligraphy is the art of the line, and the lines in calligraphy are the movements of the brush as it moves across the paper’, he tells me. For Wang Huangsheng, the line reveals the real time of the process of making the work (the Chinese way is not to raise the brush or pencil from the paper) but also the ‘time of my heart’ as he calls it. The line is ‘able to articulate abstract or psychological concepts which otherwise cannot be expressed’. He repeats a saying in Chinese, 大象無形, which translated means, ‘Great form has no shape’ which sounds remarkably close to Klee’s nostrum quoted earlier. Yet if Paul Klee seemed a transgressive artist challenging the post Renaissance separation between writing and visual art to ‘make visible’, the tradition of Chinese calligraphy effortlessly ensures that there is not nor has there ever been such a separation and remains the traditional and usable form for revealing inner processes (even the tradition of Chinese landscape painting is not primarily a matter of representing a seen landscape but of representing the interior landscape of the artist’s mind).

It is easy to see that western art history, and the museums which are forged by this history, find this troubling. In London, the British Museum collects and exhibits ink painting; the Tate does not do so; in New York, MOMA does not collect ink painting but the Metropolitan does and recently has staged an exhibition of contemporary ink painting which characterized it not only in terms of medium but also in terms of spirit. For western art history, tradition and the contemporary seem almost antithetical.
Wang Huangsheng is clear that China’s vision is firmly fixed on the future and on integration with the international world (including the art world) – trends that are both necessary and to be welcomed. But it is precisely at such a moment, he believes, that it is important, to use his words, ‘to linger on the special characteristics of Chinese culture’. His ambition is to mix the ‘special characteristics of Chinese art with international art to make new cultural forms’.

Like many of the interesting artists of China, Wang Huangsheng came to maturity during the ‘80s, the period of ‘opening up’ after the death of Mao Ze Dong in 1976 – which means also that he lived through the Cultural Revolution, an attempt among other things to cancel tradition. Wang Huangsheng’s father belonged to the Literati tradition of artists and in the early ‘70s was sent into the countryside, as was the case of many others. It was at this time that his father encouraged his son to learn Chinese calligraphy. When he tells me this, I ask him if his father had the opportunity to see his recent work. ‘Yes, he saw it a couple of years ago when he was 103’, he told me. ‘What did he say?’ I ask. ‘Did he like it?’ ‘Yes’, Wang Huangsheng replied. He told me, ‘It is different’. As he said this, it brought to mind Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote, the story by the great Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges, where Menard writes out Don Quixote word for word, only to feel that it is different. Wang Huangsheng’s art is loyal to tradition but in order to make something new, something different; his art shows, among much else, that it is possible to belong to the future without abandoning loyalty to the past.

Philip Dodd most recently curated a retrospective of Sean Scully in Beijing and Shanghai
Moving Visions
140430, 2014.
Ink on paper.
140 x 140 cm.
Moving Visions
Series No. 75,
2013.
Ink on paper,
70 x 70 cm.
Moving Visions
140511, 2014.
Ink on paper,
240 x 124 cm x 3
You might call Wang Huangsheng a traditionalist—an artist whose work employs a classical medium and which follows a rigorous and academic study into the history of painting. At least, this is how it looks, when one considers that Wang predominately works with ink on paper: a practice that feeds into a long historical tradition encapsulated in the figure of the academic painter or painter-intellectual who renders views of nature—of mountains and water—in the tradition of shanshui. But that Wang is a traditionalist in this context is subverted when you take into account the history of Chinese ink painting, no less in Wang’s personal history: he learned how to paint from his father, a Literati painter who taught his son what he knew during the Cultural Revolution. This was when the so-called Four Olds named by the communist regime—customs, culture, habits, and ideas—were being erased.

You could say there has always been an element of camouflaged subversion in ink painting, though. This is especially true when considering the popular subject of nature within the discipline—not just a representation, but as thought, sense, and state of mind. Consider one of the main motifs—mountains. These have been the locations for tales about intellectuals exiling themselves from corrupt civilisations in countless stories and poems throughout the long and complicated history of Chinese culture. Take Yang Fudong’s epic five-part film Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest (2003–2007), which refers to the story of five men and two women—writers and poets—who escaped to the Yellow Mountain during the Wei and Jin Dynasty through the Bamboo Forest. The five-screen installation is a long, sweeping exploration of the personal (and yet shared) anxieties that quiver beneath controlled façades: an overview of society and its simmering alienation balanced with portrayals of human attempts at transcending such confines; messy, chaotic, but beautiful and idealized.

The running theme in many of these stories is the wisdom and folly of solitude, and taking strength from the vital power encapsulated in the natural order of things. The importance placed on nature as a space through which to consider oneself as part of the world is something Lu Peng locates in the philosophical writings of the Zhuangzi, named after its author, that describes a Taoist understanding of the world through a certain kind of consciousness of place within a larger, material system. Here, I will borrow what I have written before on scholar rocks to describe the essence of a Chinese landscape painting as representations in this regard. After all, landscape paintings, like scholar rocks, are an articulation of place and presence: objects of contemplation in which nature is abstracted through a fragment—a rock polished to invoke the rugged facades of steep mountains, or the view of a great river through the trees from a hilltop. But they are ultimately abstractions, too. Think of the Romantic painters, who often rendered man but a wispy stroke in a vast landscape. Or Tang Dynasty poet Du Fu’s poem A View of Taishan, in which he wonders when he will reach the top of the Great Peak and hold all the mountains in a single glance. In other words, the function is not so much to see a bigger picture as to feel its scale. In this, classical Chinese ink studies of mountains represent a kind of totality—a worldview textured with histories and associations, or an unseen whole: an organic structure, system, or rhizomatic grid within which all bodies and beings on earth are caught. These are landscapes of history, identity and ideologies, too. Take the Northern Song Dynasty painting Qingmingshanghetu by Zhang Zeduan, which presents an extensive, bird’s-eye view of daily life in the city. The first painting of its kind to show market scenes with commoners in the frame, it is a work of meticulous detail; a scan of society rendered as visual document. It recalls the Apadana reliefs of Persepolis, in which subjects of the Achaemenid Empire are depicted making offerings to Darius I in what Margaret Cool Root describes as a projection ‘of harmonious imperial order...’