

# ARTslant **New York**

## Cigarettes, Hold the Coffee

by Charlie Schultz

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Wang Tiande

Chambers Fine Art

522 West 19th Street , New York, NY 1011

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The great Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges once imagined a library filled with books of every language, written using all possible combinations of words and letters, which added up to a lot of indecipherable texts. Borges called the story “The Library of Babel” and sitting in the reading room of Wang Tiande’s exhibition, *3,720: Recent Works by Wang Tiande*, I had the feeling I was in a wing of Borges’ library. A nice wooden table sat in the center of a well-lit, noiseless room. Wooden bookshelves were lined with Wang’s novel, *3,720*, which gives the exhibition its name. A few of Wang’s small works adorned the walls. It would have been a terrific place to delve into the book, except it was only available in Mandarin. So I flipped through the pages, looking at the letters as one looks at a work of art, admiring the aesthetics of the characters without having a clue as to what they might mean.



The second part of the exhibition showcases the work that has become Wang’s trademark. Known as the “Digital Series,” Wang executes a traditional calligraphic ink-on-paper composition that he overlays with a second, similar composition except instead of using ink he burns his marks in the Xuan (rice) paper with the tip of a cigarette. Because the rice paper is largely transparent the first layer is still visible, though slightly obscured by the burn patterns of the second layer. The work is elegant and masterly, but what it has to do with anything digital is unclear to me.

The rice paper pieces are vertically oriented and are about as wide as a skateboard and twice as long. Many of them are paired with what appear to be preliminary studies, which are floated in frames the same size as the larger pieces. Everything is neat and orderly, which only enhances the meticulous nature of Wang’s process. There is also a long handscroll displayed on a narrow table running down the center of the gallery that uses the same burn and layer technique. It is as impressive as the other pieces in the “Digital Series,” though whatever story or moral it might recount is pretty impenetrable unless there is a translator on hand.

What I find incredible about the “Digital Series,” however, is that the work is not any less beautiful because it is illegible (to me). In a museum there would be wall text explaining everything, making it all “understandable.” And if that had been provided I would have certainly read it, and probably would have spent less time admiring Wang’s exceptionally skilled touch with a cigarette and a calligraphy brush. In fact, this exhibition is a perfect example of the core thesis in Susan Sontag’s seminal text, *Against Interpretation*, that it is not necessary to understand something for it to be aesthetically stimulating.

~**Charlie Schultz**

Images: **Wang Tiande**: *Digital-No10-HL13*, 2010, Xuan paper, Chinese ink on paper, burn marks; *Digital No 10 MH96*, 2010. Xuan Paper, chinese ink on paper, burn marks. Courtesy Chambers Fine Art.

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