



YANG JIECHANG, *Golden Mountain*, 2012–17, ink and color on silk, three pieces: 142 x 111 cm, 142 x 280 cm, 142 x 111 cm. Courtesy the artist and Chambers Fine Art, New York.

THE WHIP YANG JIECHANG

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CHAMBERS FINE ART

CHINA USA



YANG JIECHANG, *Untitled*, 1997, ink on Xuan paper mounted on canvas, 232 x 207 cm. Courtesy the artist and Chambers Fine Art, New York.

A single brushstroke can be as revealing about an individual as their handwriting. Chinese calligraphy masters say that the writer's character and temperament may all be expressed through the art form, with the brush itself serving as an extension of the calligrapher's arm. While tradition discourages deviation from set rules and mandated stroke orders, Guangdong-born Yang Jiechang breaks from such rigidity over the course of his four-decade-long artistic practice. The artist's solo exhibition "The Whip" at Chambers Fine Art in New York City showcases the ways in which he harnesses formal training in paper mounting, folk art and traditional Chinese painting to invent original techniques for creating his abstract and figurative works.

Yang generated the oldest painting in the show following his "Hundred Layers of Ink" series that earned him international recognition in the 1990s. While he doesn't entirely obliterate the white space in an untitled work from 1997, one can detect a lingering trace of those all-black pieces in how he allows the brush to roam and the ink to bleed across the canvas. His freeform style is observable in a short documentary playing in the gallery, revealing the physicality and the performative nature of Yang's process. Unlike other mediums that allow an artist to intermittently work on and add to a painting, the use of ink necessitates that once Yang begins, he cannot stop until the endeavor is complete. *Heaven and*

Earth in One Stroke 3 and *4* (both 2017) deliberately draw attention to this effort, as fluid motion gives way to frenetic lashes of ink—hence providing the meaning behind the title “The Whip.” Interestingly, *Heaven and Earth in One Stroke* is from where the show’s Chinese title derives. Gallery director Daniel Chen also said he considered naming the show “Lifeline” as a metaphor for tracing the importance of ink painting throughout Yang’s diverse career.



Installation view of **YANG JIECHANG**'s “The Whip,” with *Heaven and Earth in One Stroke 4* and *3* (both 2017), at Chambers Fine Art, New York, 2017. Courtesy the artist and Chambers Fine Art.

Other works play with the layering of ink. On the surface, *Interlingua* (2002) seems to be nothing more than a crudely drawn outline of a heart. Peer closer and another painting that’s been washed over becomes visible. What appears to be a second heart, this one approximating the organ’s anatomical shape, lays hidden beneath. Additionally, one can make out Yang’s signature in the bottom right-hand corner, signifying that this hidden work was perhaps completed before he decided to paint over it. This technique is repeated with other basic shapes such as in *Goringo* (2017), which features rough outlines of a rectangle, triangle and circle, while English words spelled out in *Difficult* (2008) and *God* (2014) push the boundaries of Chinese calligraphic art. Consistent in many of these pieces, Yang revisits yet another technique he developed while working on “Hundred Layers of Ink,” in which multiple coats of ink become so thick that they clump and crack. This creates three-dimensional ridges, with certain surfaces looking wet or seeming to turn a dark shade of blue under the lights. Again, contrary to the effortless presentation inherent in traditional calligraphy, Yang’s experimentation with these otherwise simple materials suggests that the process is as integral and worthy of being seen as the end result.



YANG JIECHANG, *Interlingua*, 2002, ink on Xuan paper mounted on canvas, 111 x 112 cm. Courtesy the artist and Chambers Fine Art, New York.

Perhaps the grandest example of all his undertakings is *Golden Mountain* (2012–17), a three-panel landscape painted in the tidy, realist, traditional style known as *gongbi*. Inspired by 14th-century Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, which contains 100 tales told in a period of 10 days, Yang's dreamlike work picks up where the story leaves off. In a previous series of paintings and sculptures known as "Tale of the 11th Day" (2010–11), he introduces the erotic vision of Paradise—where different species of animals, including humans, engage in sensual and sexual poses with each other—that continues to be explored in this newer work. In one corner, a woman hugs a small mammal while surrounded by a panda, foxes and penguins. Elsewhere, a tiger embraces a horse, while nearby another big cat couples with an elephant. Yang initially conceived this surreal realm during the 2007–08 financial crisis as an alternative to the current world order, one where no hierarchy exists among the beasts of this earth. In this light, we can view the artist's brush as an egalitarian tool. Similarly, while Yang has resided in Europe for nearly 30 years, calligraphy and ink painting remain the lifeline linking the artist back to his cultural origins.

Yang Jiechang's "*The Whip*" is on view at Chambers Fine Art, New York, until October 17, 2017.

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