ETERNAL SPRING

Ma Desheng

BY ANDREW COHEN

It was 1978 and change was in the air in China. Mao Zedong had died just two years earlier, and the nation began to reawaken after 30 years of oppression that had claimed over 50 million lives. As the Bamboo Curtain lifted, young, daring voices called out for freedom and reform, heralding in what became known as the Beijing Spring. Deng Xiaoping, the new "paramount leader," experimented with economic reforms and free speech, and even tolerated the open posting of liberal ideas and avant-garde artworks in one easily monitored locale in central Beijing— the Democracy Wall was the name given to this long brick wall running along Xidan Street, just west of Tiananmen Square.

The Beijing-born artist and poet Ma Desheng was one of the more outspoken and radical artistic voices active at the Wall. "Some people would come to the Wall after work in the late afternoon to learn things and talk with others," Ma tells me 35 years later at his favorite hole-in-the-wall café next to his Paris studio. "But most wouldn't dare go because they were scared. You needed courage even to look at what was posted. Cops were taking photos. I went almost every day."

People gathered to read and digest the progressive perspectives offered by the poems, prints and big-character poster essays that were hung on the Wall—the most famous of the latter being Wei Jingsheng's "Fifth Modernization," which, like many of the postings, called for freedom and democracy. In stark contrast to activists' use of social-media platforms during the recent Arab Spring, the Democracy Wall was the reform movement's only public forum for the exchange of ideas and information.

"Among the first things to appear on the Democracy Wall," Ma recalls, "was the first issue of a magazine called *Jintian* ('Today')—the pages were stuck on the wall, one next to the other." These public postings helped the inaugural issue of *Jintian*—an upstart underground literary journal with a limited circulation—reach a broader audience. With all the talent associated with the journal, it became the most important of the post-Mao magazines that supported individual freedom of expression in response to the censorship and artistic restrictions of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). This defiant approach was exemplified by a group of officially denounced writers known as the "Misty Poets," which included the magazine's founders Bei Dao and Mang Ke.

Ma's first postings on the Wall were the short story "Shouruo de ren" ("The Skinny Wretch")—an existential tale set in a desert, its protagonist starving mad and thirsting for freedom—and two of his antiestablishment woodblock prints, all of which had been included in *Jintian*'s first issue. One print portrayed an exhausted garbage collector rolling a cigarette while taking a break from his daily drudgery; the other depicted a peasant on his knees, hands held up to the sky, howling in misery. "The Party would say peasants and workers were the most happy in the world; I would show they were the most unhappy. This shocked people at the Wall because they never saw art with such subject matter," Ma explains.

Born in Beijing in 1952, Ma had come of age during the chaos and turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, when the government closed art academies and persecuted teachers, intellectuals and artists. The Red Guards—a helter-skelter paramilitary youth movement encouraged by Mao at the time—were even called on to denounce their own parents and teachers in order to break with traditional values and cultures. Students and professors were regularly trucked off to the countryside to work the land alongside peasants in Mao's campaign of "reeducation." As it did for many of his generation, this period of mayhem left indelible scars on Ma's psyche.

He became disillusioned with the cult of Mao when he saw the violent acts of the Red Guards and the humiliation of his teachers at school. "I realized something was wrong," he says. "When I grew older, I realized society is not as good as [Mao] said. Just because the Party says everything is red, it doesn't mean we have to think everything is red. It's childish and comic to say everything is red, everything is beautiful. Even if you saw another color, you had to say you saw red."

(Previous spread)
ROCKS 4 (detail), 2007, acrylic on canvas, 140 x 200 cm.

(This page, top)
ROLLED CIGARETTE, 1978, woodblock print, 20 x 17 cm.

(This page, bottom)
UNTITLED 1, 1979, woodblock print on Chinese paper, 22.8 x 22.4 cm.

(Opposite page)
Ma Desheng and the members of the Stars Group gathered on the balcony of the National Art Museum of China, 1980.

All images in this article are courtesy the artist unless otherwise stated.

Throughout this societal upheaval of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Ma maintained a stony, conformist exterior while secretly honing a more radical sensibility with like-minded confidants. During the Cultural Revolution, artistic self-expression and unorthodox ideas were severely criticized, and even punishable by internment and hard labor. In the city, Ma and his circle of artist and poet friends held underground meetings in dimly lit and smoke-filled hutong flats.

"We kept our work at home, hidden," Ma says. "When we had girls pose as naked models, we would put black curtains over the windows so no one could see. If there was a knock on the door, the girl rushed to put her clothes on." A big smile stretches across his broad-cheeked, handsome face, and then suddenly contracts: "We lived under constant fear, moral pressure—fear of being criticized and arrested."

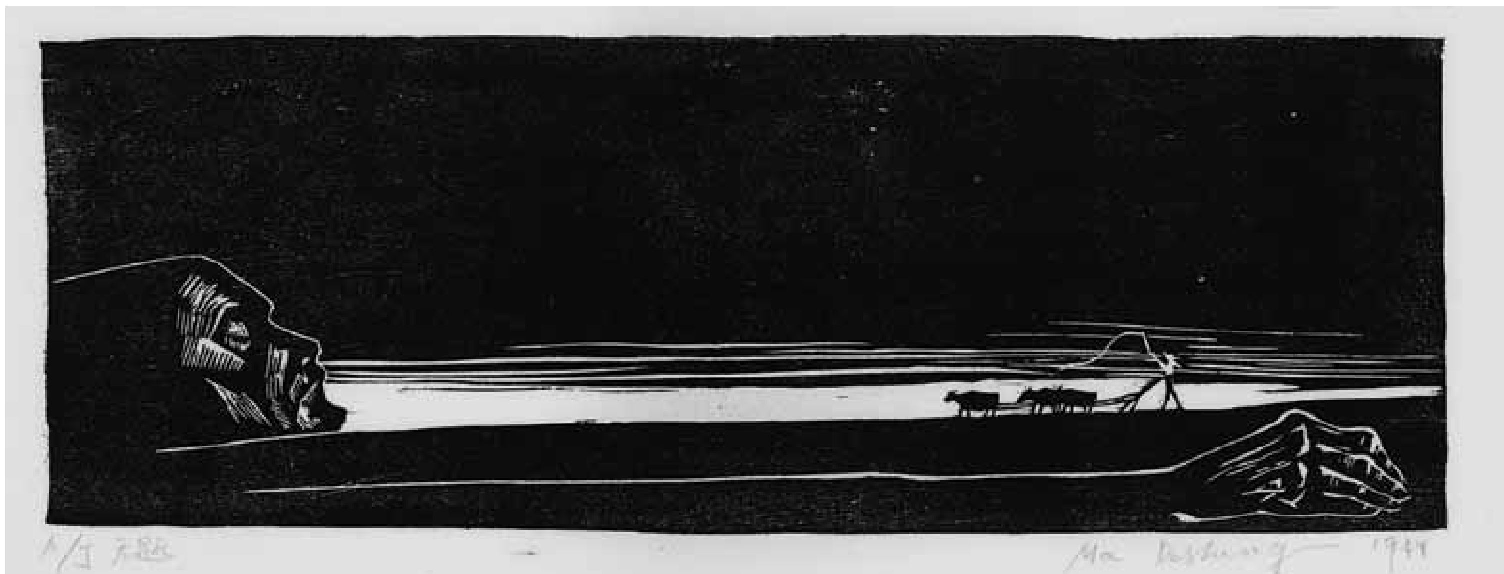
Like many of his fellow artists, Ma hungered for the formal training he had been denied because of the Cultural Revolution's closure of art schools. A graduate degree would have granted him the coveted status of an official art worker. In 1977, he applied to the recently reestablished Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts, but was denied entry. "One reason for the rejection," Ma explains, "was due to my handicap [childhood polio had left him on crutches], and the other was because I was very liberal in my thoughts." Undeterred and certain of his destiny as an artist, Ma relied on his background as an industrial draftsman in a machinery factory—to which he had been assigned since 1971—and utilized the precision skills he acquired there to enhance his developing talent as a woodblock printer.

"I remember going to the library to take out a book on art," Ma says. "The man looked at my work ID and saw that I was working in a factory. He told me, being a worker, I shouldn't look at art. He refused to lend me the book. I was very angry and said, 'What if Marx had been stopped from reading the books he wanted to read?' 'Well, that was the West,' the man replied, 'this is China.'"

In an art study group at the People's Cultural Center for Workers, Ma met another self-taught artist named Huang Rui. They immediately struck up a friendship, and Huang, who was in charge of *Jintian*'s layout, introduced Ma to the magazine's editors and contributors. At the end of 1978 and the beginning of 1979, Ma and Huang started visiting the homes of similar-minded "unofficial" artists in order to view their works. Together, they decided to form an art group of creative minds who dared to display, in public and for free, individual and non-socialist-realist artworks that directly opposed the kitschy, formulaic propaganda art fostered by the Party. They successfully assembled the outsider circle of artists that would later become known as the Stars Group (Xingxing).

"When I was growing up there was only one star in the sky, the red sun, Mao Zedong. Many stars mean many people. Every individual is a star," Ma says, explaining the imagery behind the choice of the group's name. By 1979, armed with paintbrushes, chisels and their wits, this ragtag army of factory workers would challenge the state's censorship apparatus and alter the course of Chinese art history, helping to set it on an avant-garde and contemporary track.

"At first we hid our thoughts and work. Then we started sharing them with family . . . then close friends . . . then soon we risked the workplace. And then, after that, the street. Yeah, the street," he says with a fiery smile. The Stars established their own wall in Beijing—one exclusively devoted to free artistic expression—by defiantly hanging their first exhibition on the fence outside the National Art Gallery (now the National Art Museum of China) in September 1979. Running inside the institution at the time was a



major state-sponsored exhibit of propaganda art celebrating the 30th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic.

The Stars were the first post-Mao art group to publicly confront and challenge the totalitarian system. Jettisoning the socialist realist perspectives of propaganda art, they embraced previously banned modernist forms. "Our pieces were different because they related to society more closely," Ma says. "We wanted to express democracy and freedom. And even beauty. At that time beauty was not fashionable." Their work reflected the hard realities of daily life, not the selective truths of the Party's propaganda machine. Ma and fellow artist Wang Keping created some of the group's more politically charged works: Ma's stark, expressionistic woodblock prints and Wang's absurdist wood sculptures made explicit criticisms of Mao and the Gang of Four—the political faction, including Mao's last wife Jiang Qing, that was being blamed by Mao's immediate successor Hua Guofeng for the excesses of the Cultural Revolution.

Uncompromising, fatalistic ruminations on the human condition under Chinese Communism, Ma's black-and-white prints were directly influenced by those of revolutionary woodblock printer Lu Xun and European artists Käthe Kollwitz and Edvard Munch. They certainly had an impact on Ai Weiwei, the youngest member of the Stars Group at the time, who recalls over lunch in Beijing that "[Ma's] works had a very powerful, revolutionary influence; some were very poetic and symbolic."

In stark contrast to the Communist kitsch of socialist realism—propaganda images of Chairman Mao smiling or of eager peasants and soldiers, painted in the happy colors mandated by Jiang Qing's Cultural Revolution Group—Ma used large planes of black, a color previously considered counterrevolutionary. "Black and white best expressed what we were living. Their color was red, bright and shiny. We preferred black and gray." Ma's print *Vision* (1980), for instance, comments on Chairman Mao's propagation of his own image as the bright sun shining down on the masses, who, Mao believed, were like sunflowers, instinctively turning toward his magnetic rays. In Ma's black-and-white *Vision*, the sun explodes and the people turn away from it in silence.

Ma's observation of peasants and workers in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution had heightened his concern about basic human inequalities and the corruption of the government that fostered them. He expresses this injustice in his existential print *Rest* (1979), which depicts a peasant in a sliver of light, plowing the earth toward the vast and inevitable blackness of his bleak destiny.

"Black and white best expressed what we were living. Their color was red, bright and shiny. We preferred black and gray."

(This page)
UNTITLED 18 (REST), 1979, woodblock print on Chinese paper, 10.9 x 30.8 cm.

(Opposite page)
POPSICLE VENDOR, 1980, woodblock print, 40 x 34.5 cm.

In the landmark article "About the Stars Art Exhibition" (1980), published in *Meishu* ("Art"), an official art journal, its radical editor Li Xianting quotes Ma:

> There is an epitaph to my print *Rest*:
>
> *He came into the world in silence, and departs again in silence, having left behind millions of drops of sweat on the earth.*
>
> Every year when I went back to the countryside, I would watch the peasants doing their mindless and primitive physical labor. I realized how poor they were in material and cultural terms, compared with the people in the cities. Yet they never complained and went about their work in silence. Then I went back to the city and saw how different things actually were. Some Party cadres were always ranting on about how poor China was, and how everyone had to tighten their belts, but they did nothing of this kind. Even as thousands of people had no place to call home, they were busy building luxury flats for themselves.

Hanging works so explicitly critical of the Party's extravagance and oppressive policies on a street fence just outside China's most prestigious museum shortly before October 1—National Day—had inevitable consequences. Police were ordered to tear down the Star Group's exhibit and confiscate the art after only two days. When the commanding officer threatened the artists, demanding to know who was in charge, Ma immediately assumed responsibility. He and Huang were taken into custody and released later that day.

In retaliation for what they considered a breach of the new constitution adopted by China in 1978, which guaranteed the right to free cultural activities, the Stars Group secretly met at a friend's home and began planning the first unauthorized public protest rally and march since the Communists came to power in 1949. There was an internal debate between Ma—who was adamantly in favor of confronting the authorities by demonstrating—and co-founder Huang, who, fearing further consequences, argued for sitting down and negotiating with the authorities. After a consensus was taken among the Stars, Ma's position prevailed.

The date was set—the 30th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic. The starting point was the Democracy Wall. Amid the pomp and fanfare of the national anniversary spectacle, the Stars insisted on voicing their constitutional rights. One thousand people gathered by the Wall. Ma, on crutches, led the artists, protestors and foreign journalists around police roadblocks for over five kilometers to the Beijing Communist Party Municipal Building, by which time the crowd had dwindled down to a few hundred. "Ma had deep, dark eyes, a burning flame deep inside and a very charming smile," says Paris-based journalist Marie Holzman, who worked for Agence France-Presse in Beijing at the time. "But, like a mountain lake, he could turn into a volcano within seconds if something made him angry. Then his voice would be booming and no one dared utter a single sound." Beneath a light rain, Ma gave an impassioned speech to the crowd calling for equality and freedom of expression—a daring move that risked his life and liberty.

Looking back, Ma recalls, "The day of the march, we were so nervous. When I left home to go, I emptied all my pockets and looked at my parents as if it were the last time I would see them. I thought I might be killed. It was the first free march in 30 years. I was very happy to speak out. Even if I could be killed, I was so happy to dare to speak out. So many people were listening, including Party bureaucrats."

Wang Keping reflects from Paris: "We could have gone to jail because we were protesting. But Ma Desheng always walked at the front of the march. He was very courageous." Ai Weiwei concurs: "Ma is really a strong character. He struggled to survive, and struggled for artistic freedom at the same time. His situation was fragile at times, but his spirit was always high. I admire him for that."

Despite the glimpses of freedom the Democracy Wall offered, the Beijing Spring quickly turned to winter. In 1979, Wei Jingsheng, the outspoken leader of the fledgling democracy movement, was arrested and given a perfunctory closed trial. For his part, Ma helped to smuggle out and hang the transcripts of Wei's trial on the Democracy Wall. A new wave of government crackdowns and oppression followed.

The Democracy Wall was shut down by Deng in December 1979, and *Jintian* magazine was forced to cease publication by 1980. Most of the Stars artists began to leave China, starting with Ai in 1981. The subsequent emigration of Huang, Wang and artist Qu Leilei, among others, was foreshadowed in one of Ma's woodblock prints, *Untitled 6* (1981), from the seminal rock series he was just embarking on. In the work, anthropomorphic and closely huddled rock figures gaze toward the sea at distant boats sailing on the horizon.

In 1983, Ma was targeted in the "antispiritual pollution" campaign —a government policy intended to curb Western-inspired liberal ideas and imports, such as erotica and existential philosophy, that had flourished during the reforms of the Beijing Spring. "There was no way to expose my paintings; to express myself freely; there was no hope in Chinese society, so I left," Ma reflects.

(This page)
Ma Desheng speaks passionately to the crowd gathered in front of the Beijing Communist Party Municipal Building, 1979.

(Opposite page, top)
The artist leading the protest on crutches on the 30th anniversary of the People's Republic along the Democracy Wall in Beijing, 1979.

(Opposite page, bottom)
UNTITLED 6, 1981, woodblock print on Chinese paper, 30.3 x 44.9 cm.

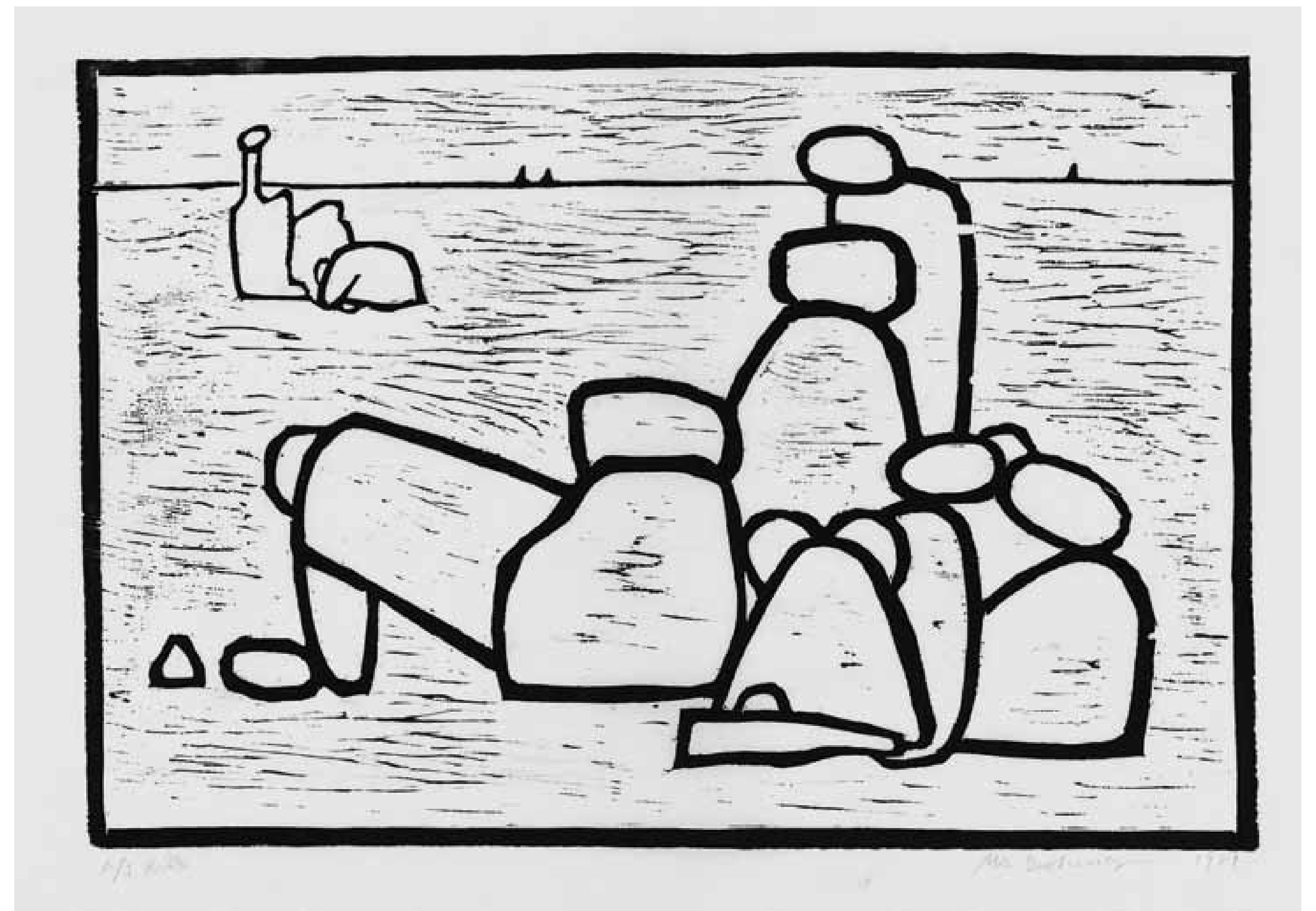
He never again saw his parents, who are now dead, nor his brothers and sisters, nor his friends, severing all relations. "He didn't want to cause problems for his family, so he never saw them again," says Wang. Asked how he feels about losing his roots, Ma says, "Each person must bear his own pain."

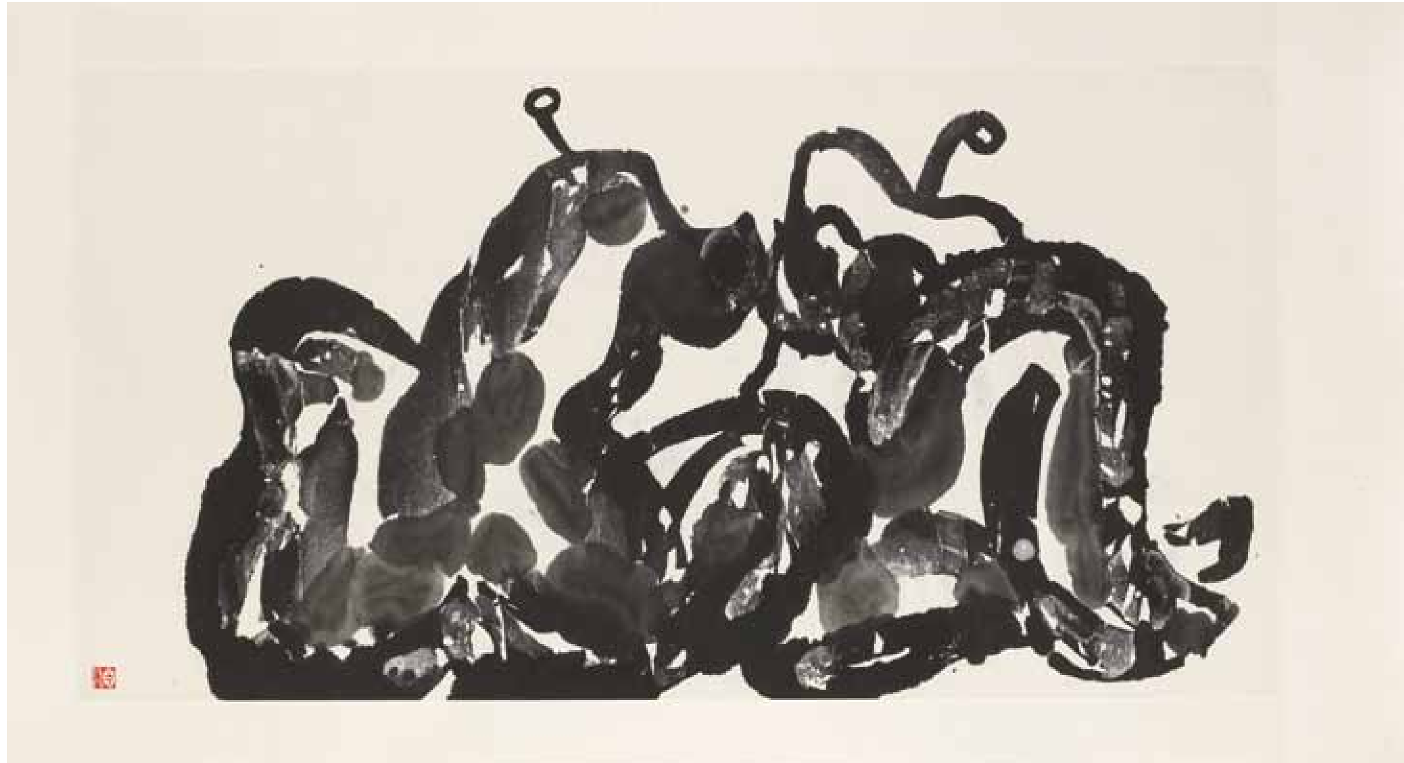
Ma settled in Switzerland in 1985, the only country to extend him an invitation. A year later, he moved to Paris, where he has now lived, worked and found inspiration for almost 30 years. He joins a prestigious lineage of 20th-century Chinese émigré artists to have found a home there, including Sanyu, Zao Wou-ki and Chu Teh-Chun, along with his contemporaries Huang Yongping, Yan Pei-Ming and his Stars comrade Wang, who arrived in Paris in 1984.

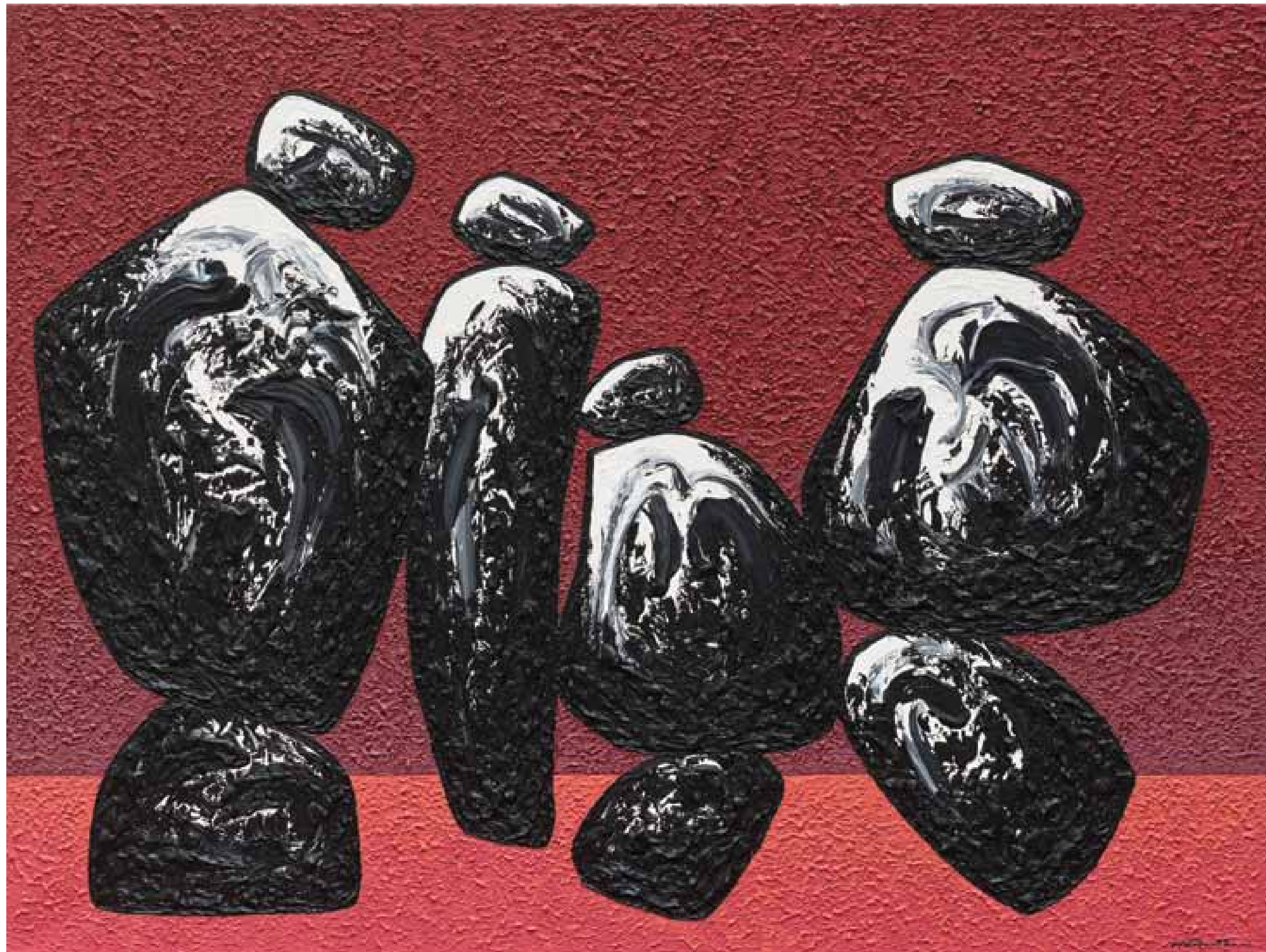
This new distance from his homeland afforded Ma the opportunity to reevaluate his relationship to traditional Chinese ink painting. Immersed in his novel surroundings, Ma was now free to develop the nude ink-wash series for which he had been criticized in China before his emigration. In these works from the early to late 1980s, Ma explored the naked female body on his own unorthodox and experimental terms.

Influenced by the modernist forms he saw in ancient Han Dynasty sculpture (206 BCE–220 CE) and the traditions of Song Dynasty painting (960–1129 CE), in which the first stroke must be the best and each minimalist line is charged with expressionistic emotion, Ma captured the essence of his subject with strong black lines and rubbed brushstrokes. Like calligraphy, Chinese classical landscapes or the inks of Bada Shanren (c. 1626–1705), in which the figurative contains the abstract, Ma's nudes are transcendental bodyscapes.

Ma recalls his exhilaration during these early days in Paris: "I felt so free; there was no need to put a curtain on the window. One day, when my model went to get a glass of water by the window, I instinctively jumped up to stop her. She looked at me laughing,







(Opposite page, top)
INK NUDE 4, 1987, ink on Chinese paper, 68 x 127 cm. Courtesy the artist and Rossi & Rossi, London.

(Opposite page, bottom)
ROCKS 1, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 200 cm. Courtesy the artist and Rossi & Rossi, London.

and said, 'No one cares if I want to stand naked by the window.'" In Ma's ink works of the time, the rounded brushstrokes and black to silvery-grey tones accentuate the ripe sensuality of his models' bosoms and buttocks, while his splash and pool effects, reminiscent of action painting, capture the abandonment of sexual arousal.

His *Ink Nude 4* (1987) shows a mischievous, orgy-like group of naked figures, and echoes the compositions of modern masterpieces such as Paul Cézanne's *The Bathers* (1900–06) and Henri Matisse's *The Dance* (1910). Though rendered in black ink, through its multishaded forms Ma's grouping reflects an erotic lightness and playfulness that is in complete contrast to the heavy conventionality of the group portraits in the propaganda art he encountered during his youth.

Ma's early years in Paris were not without their difficulties. "When I arrived in France, people didn't know about ink painting," he says. "They thought it was watercolor. So, their idea of price was very low. When I heard the dealers' prices, I rolled up my paintings and went away, thinking these people don't know anything about Chinese art. It's like Zao Wou-ki—his oils bring a fortune, and his inks very little. As kids we learned with ink brush; there was no oil painting in China then. It doesn't matter what the medium is, what matters is the impression it makes on you. I mixed traditional and modern art."

However, his ink work would come to a sudden and tragic halt. In 1992, a car accident killed his German girlfriend, Barbara Holesten (a psychiatrist whom he met at a Wei Jingsheng conference in the United States), and left Ma drifting in and out of hospitals for two years. He lost all control of his legs and hand coordination. After a long struggle, Ma rehabilitated his fingers sufficiently to enable him to wedge a large brush in his hand. "At first, the nurse was feeding me," he says. "Then one day the doctor said to stop, or I would never be self-sufficient. He wrapped a fork in my hand. After a period of difficult rehabilitation, I was able to hold it on my own." He pauses to recall the car accident that killed his girlfriend over 20 years ago, then says, "I have the feeling she is not dead. Our souls are still there. She is sitting right here, next to us."

Finally able to paint, but lacking precision, he was forced to forsake ink wash on paper. He turned instead to acrylic on canvas, which allowed him to make corrections by retouching or scraping the canvas. Now working from a wheelchair, he often used brush extensions to reach his larger canvases—as Matisse had done in his later years. But those wonderful first strokes and the subtle nuances of the ink brush that Ma had spent many years mastering were lost. "I used to hold a traditional Chinese brush, which was very sensitive. When my hand was no good, I had to switch styles. With time, I realized you don't have to define a difference between Eastern or Western art. Take Ai Weiwei, you can't say he's Chinese or Western. He's a mixture of both."

Ever positive and proactive, Ma made a stylistic shift in his acrylic works, developing his earlier rock series on large-format canvases. Ma paints rocks over and over again almost in the manner of a meditative mantra. Like the bottles clustered together in Giorgio Morandi's still lifes, Ma's rocks become metaphysical conceits for the human condition. Beneath the smooth skins of these stones lie tumultuous psychological interiors—freewheeling abstractions and gestures of liberation that recall the artist's own past volcanic eruptions as a freedom fighter. "He is still like that, in fact," says Marie Holzman, "just slightly mellower."

Using a broad, freehand calligraphy technique to suit his limited control, Ma incorporates Chinese and Western engraving techniques to make the paint sharply raised or smooth, bringing out the contradictions of hard and soft, calm and stormy—qualities contained within the artist himself. He combines bright colors, built-up paint and sandy textures to create works that contrast strongly with his earlier black-and-white prints and ink washes.

"Rocks existed before humans," Ma says, and he paints them to express the feeling of eternity. But Ma's rocks can also be seen as sociological symbols of the individual in society. Like peoples and governments engaged in interdependent and precarious balancing acts, the rocks give the appearance of being in perfect harmony in a manner that seems almost magical. But this coexistence is always fragile—if one rock were moved even slightly, it would unbalance them all and send them crashing.

After suffering another accident in the summer of 2013, in which he fell from his wheelchair and broke his hip, Ma underwent painful surgery and rehabilitation. A veteran warrior, he is now busier than ever, painting colorful large-format nudes, which he describes as "an eternal theme that I have never abandoned, always finding different forms. If we went back to a matriarchal society, life would be more peaceful, and there would be more love."

Ironically, today it is no longer communism but rather the embrace of market capitalism that threatens to unbalance Chinese art and distort the priorities of its artists. Perhaps Ma is different because of his poetic nature and inspirational visions—the material world is a means, not an end, to his creativity. As he has done his whole life, Ma continues to live and work in humble surroundings, a distant cry from the trappings of success many of his peers in China enjoy. For 35 years, buoyed by an eternal sense of spring, Ma Desheng—one of China's unsung, early democracy leaders and catalysts for change—has championed the right of the individual to be free. Relations between people and between nations, he says, should limit neither politics, nor art. Both should be concerned with the bigger space: the earth and universe. That is where real freedom will be found.

Ma says it simply in a few lines from one of his improvisational poems, written in 2012:

No air, no life.
No life, no art.
No art, no life.

See our website for Arabic and Chinese versions of this article.
يمكنكم قراءة ترجمة عربية لهذه المقالة في موقعنا على الانترنت.
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