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An intriguing idea that's only half thought-out



LANDSCAPE OF THE MIND? Dripping ink forms a captivating background in Jennifer Wen Ma's video at the Phillips. (James Brantley)



INDELIBLE 'INK STORM': Chen Shaoxiong's videos at Transformer. (Transformer Gallery)

By [Jessica Dawson](#)
Washington Post Staff Writer
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As part of the Phillips Collection's ramped-up contemporary art program, the museum recently inaugurated "Intersections." The exhibition series asks artists to respond to the museum's holdings -- the Arthur Doves, the Mark Rothkos, those Jacob Lawrence "Migration" panels -- and to work in spaces that visitors normally overlook. With "Intersections," the Phillips promises to be a place that "challenges visitors' expectations of how and where they experience art," as a recent announcement pledged.

It's a solid ground plan for a museum that has floundered under years of impressionist rehash. But can "Intersections" fulfill its claims? Will "unexpected encounters" with art "create new relationships"?

If the first iteration is any indication, "Intersections" is both a triumph and a failure.

Called "Brain Storm," the inaugural project opened last week and comes in two parts. Its centerpiece is an engaging video by the 36-year-old Beijing-born artist Jennifer Wen Ma. It screens in one of the tiny second-floor rooms in the Phillips's original house, and has the room to itself. Taken alone, the modest film holds steady in the company of greats. (A selection from Lawrence's "Migration" series hangs in an adjacent room.)

The project's second part, which occupies the floor-to-ceiling windows of the museum's second-floor bridge, misses the mark. Transparent stills from Ma's video are affixed to the windows in hopes of altering a visitor's experience of otherwise fallow circulation areas. Though essential components of the "unexpected encounters" paradigm, the stills are barely visible and, on a recent Sunday afternoon, went largely ignored.

Before its appearance here, the "Brain Storm" video was a three-channel projection commissioned by the Bilbao Guggenheim. Ma condensed the original work into a single-channel projection here. Throughout the nearly 11-minute work, a silhouetted figure and his horse amble along, small figures near the bottom of the screen. They move as if on an invisible treadmill, walking forward but remaining in place. Behind them, a rapidly changing landscape unfolds in black ink.

Ma created that protean backdrop by filming her own manipulations of ink drips, splashes and drifts. Her camera stood flush against a clear glass tablet as she worked. When that footage is juxtaposed with the walking man, the ink's permutations begin to suggest landscapes of sand or clouds and hills. Droplets of inky water pass like falling snow or shimmering stars. The quickness of ink spreading in a pool of water mimics the sudden appearance of thunderclouds.

On rare occasions, the artist's hand appears -- to sponge up some ink and create a big white moon, say. When that human hand enters the frame, dwarfing the ambling figures, it arrives with all the power of a *deus ex machina*.

There's a quality of the everyman to Ma's figures, as if the fellow and his horse stepped from the stanzas of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." Like Robert Frost, Ma invites broad interpretations. "Brain Storm" is a life's journey or a psychic one; we witness the unfolding with curiosity and fascination. In Ma's hands, the journey is magical.

For her project's ill-conceived second part, Ma's printed stills are culled from the video's background; anchoring figures of man and horse are missing. Blurry and hazy, the stills look like undefined clouds. It's no wonder that visitors don't give these transparencies a second glance, or even a first. If this is what the Phillips offers as a radically altered visitor experience, it's not nearly radical enough.

'Ink Storm' at Transformer

"Brain Storm" isn't Ma's only exhibition in town. At Transformer, the artist curated a small exhibition, "Ink Storm," by a trio of Chinese artists. The artists are linked by their use of "mo" -- the Chinese word for "ink" -- yet all three embrace their material using radically different approaches.

Paula Tsai linked more than 400 small rice-paper ovals to create her wall work titled "Mound." The piece is just that: a mass 8 1/2-feet-high and just over 12 feet across, made from an accumulation of cell-like shapes in various shades of gray. Reminiscent of black-and-white medical illustrations, the piece is meditative but feels a bit too subtle.

The opposite is true for Dai Guangyu, who pushes politics to the forefront in the fussy "Empires Borders." The Rube Goldbergian setup: A needle hanging off an IV bag drips saline solution into a small overflowing cup. As each drop falls, the liquid spills onto a mound of dirt (shaped to look like the silhouette of China) infused with black ink. As the ink spreads, it soaks into a silk screen printed with a passage from the I Ching. Below, a mirror on the gallery floor reflects the screen, revealing that there's a silhouette of the United States (colored red) under the China-shaped dirt. Also, the words "Freedom" and "Democracy" are written across our eastern and western seabords.

Did you catch that? The piece's complications are many and its politics a strange mix of opacity and obviousness. One positive development: The gallery recently stopped the IV drip and hung the screen in the gallery window. Some clarity may come from that.

"Ink Storm's" brightest spot, by far, is Chen Shaoxiong's videos -- made by shooting countless ink-drawn panels; four videos are installed in a tower here. Chen's spontaneous drawings of people and places are lively and their narration mysterious. Something like a stranger's video diaries, they allow us in but leave plenty of questions unanswered.