

山水

SHANSHUI

The Form of Water: from the
pictorial representation of
surface waves to the cymascope

Aurora Vivenzio

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By: Aurora Vivenzio

Water emits vibrations, visible on its surface, which respond to its collision with other elements of the natural landscape it shares. Since ancient times, these forms have been a subject of study not only for physics and chemistry in their geometric configurations but also for pictorial representation. When comparing Egyptian frescoes up to Western Impressionist painting, and early Chinese representations and *Shanshui* painting, the form of water, much like perspective vision, takes on ever-different meanings in representation, accounting for ecological, visual, and cultural conditions. Water, therefore, like its representations over time, has assumed the visual container that has repre-

sented it. Contemporary art, thanks to its interdisciplinary capacity to mix art, physics, chemistry, and music, has given rise to audiovisual installations that combine the sounds and forms of water in digital animations or media images.

Since the Neolithic period, in both Asia and the West, artists have used graphic-geometric forms to capture the changing appearance of water. In this archaic phase, the aquatic element – depicted as a river or sea wave – predominantly served an ornamental function, complementing the realistic description of the scene. This is evidenced by the recurring motifs on Cretan *pithoi*, where water appears as



a magical-decorative element, as well as in pre-Han Chinese brocades, where the depiction of water aimed to capture its essential form through a graphic-geometric synthesis. In these primitive cultures, water is not yet an autonomous subject, but a backdrop that enriches the ceramic or textile surface with symbolic meaning.

It is from the Han Dynasty in China and the late Western Middle Ages that water begins to assume a more complex function, becoming a distinctly temporal, spatial-symbolic, and narrative element. In the work of the Chinese painter Gu Kaizhi 顾恺之 (348–409), famous for his narrative scrolls, water is no longer a mere ornament but a device that marks the flow of time and connects the different scenes of the story. In the famous work *Luoshen fu tu juan* 洛神赋图卷 [*Scroll of the Ode to*

the Luo River Goddess], water becomes charged with aesthetic and moral qualities, becoming a vehicle for a charm that intertwines spirituality and religiosity. Furthermore, it marks the progression of the narration, as well as the different scene changes and the transformation of the main character (fig. 1).

In the West, however, the medieval shift attributes a radically different value to water. It takes on a symbolic-religious character linked to purification. An example is Giotto's *Baptism of Christ* (Scrovegni Chapel, fresco, 200x185 cm, fig. 2), where the waters of the Jordan River touch Christ's body with transparency. Giotto abandons the mystical dissolution of the body in water in favor of simple and incisive descriptive lines, which give the element a new corporeality and realism; Christ's body does





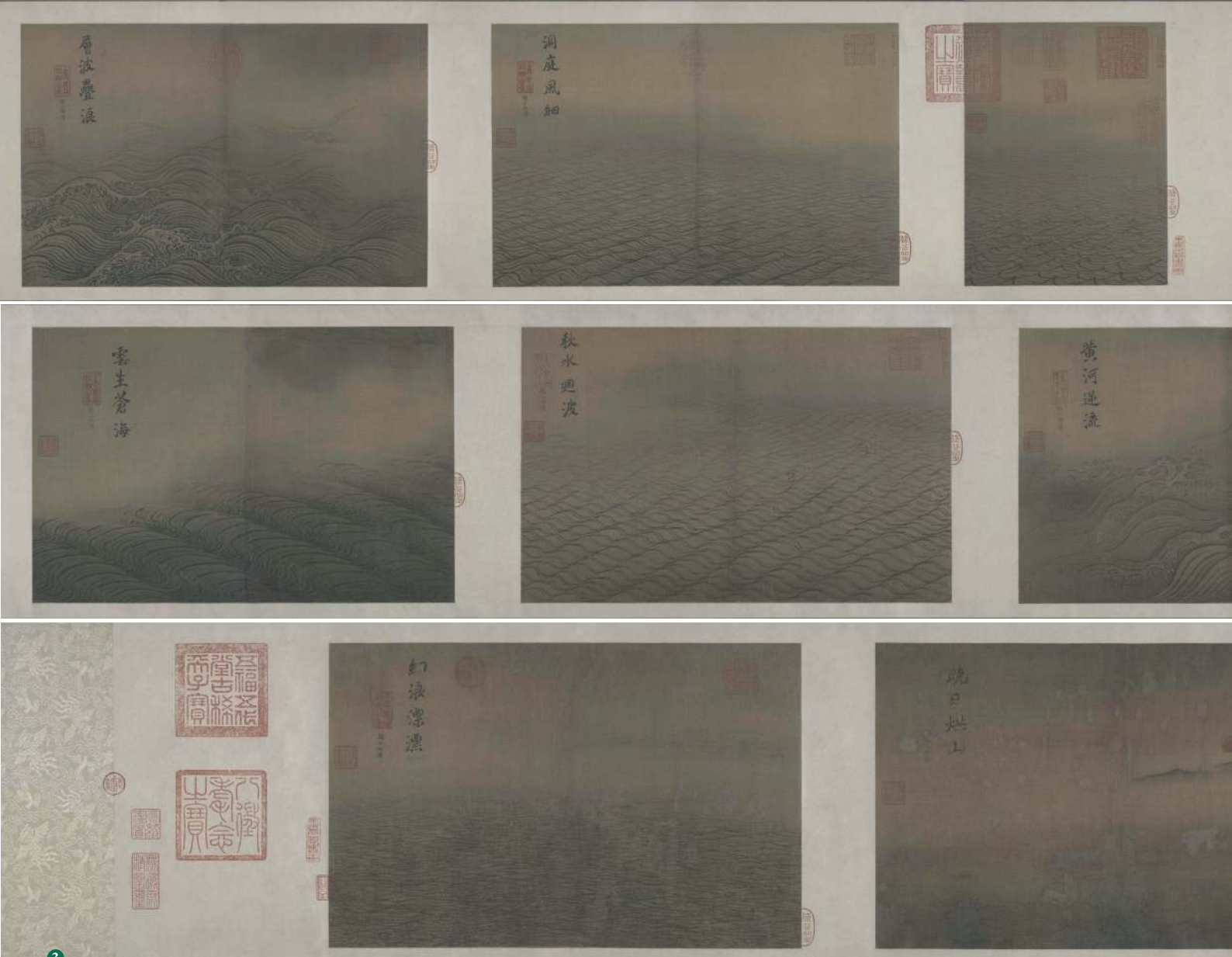


not dissolve, but fades, almost blurred, in a play of transparencies that emphasizes the purifying act and at the same time symbolizes the dual identity of Christ, flesh and spirit. A subtle interplay between the tangible (the bright body) and the intangible (the discolored body).

The comparison between the two traditions reveals a profound ontological divergence. In Chinese art, water serves as a narrative medium that removes the event from a defined historical location, projecting it into a dreamlike and suspended dimension, without a clearly demarcated space. In Gu Kaizhi's scrolls, water is an element of continuity that accompanies human events, living alongside the earthly world and creating a story that unfolds parallel to human fears and passions.

Conversely, in the Latin Middle Ages, water predominantly assumes a purifying value, becoming a memory of primordial worlds. In Christian baptism, water is not a companion to earthly events, but an instrument of redemption that colors and transfigures the body of the baptized. As the English artists Stoica and Corder observe, this chromatic fiction in ancient art – this capacity to “make appear” without being mere appearance – responds to a profound ontological question: while the East seeks in water a bridge to the sensible world, the Christian West sees in it a threshold towards the afterlife.

It is, however, with the Song Dynasty that the representation of water reaches one of its absolute peaks in the Chinese tradition. Ma Yuan 马远 (1140–1225), in the famous cycle *Twelve Views of Water*, 水图, (fig. 3), revolutionizes traditional *shanshui* painting by adopting innovative technical devices: the compositional void in the upper part of the scroll, the poetic accompaniment, and the rule of three distances. Ma Yuan does not limit himself to reproducing



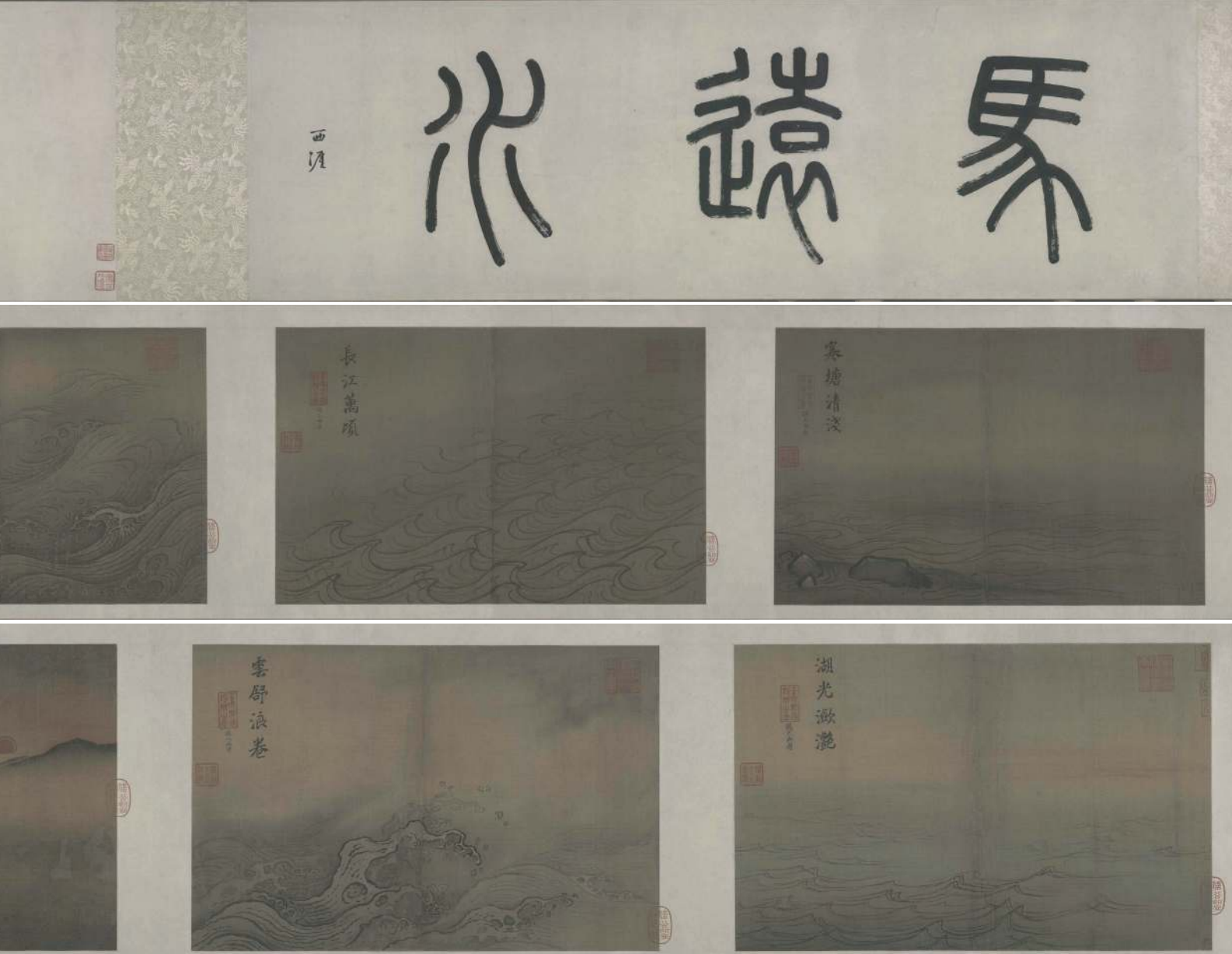
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water as a naturalistic element; he renders its sensitive manifestation, contextualizing and temporalizing it at the same time, until it transforms into a memory of lived experience.

Through the technique of the brush following the bone structure (*gufa yongbi* 骨法用笔), the artist traces the water's surface with uniform, fine, and decorative strokes, yet pervaded by an intrinsic energy. In the individual sheets of the cycle, such as *Rising Waves* or *Clear Waters of the Winter Pond* 《层波叠浪》 (section 3) 《寒塘清浅》 (section 4), Ma Yuan skillfully balances the density and lightness of the line to render the transparency, power, or stillness of the water. The result is a suspension of both time and space: the waves do not refer to a specific place, but to twelve different modes of being, representing both

the natural world and the inner universe of memory. Furthermore, the choice of the scroll is not accidental: it tells a story that unfolds over time, but does so in a fragmented and ephemeral manner, like the very transparent nature of water.

In stark contrast to Ma Yuan's poetics, Leonardo da Vinci's hydrodynamic studies (fig.4) testify to a radically different approach to the liquid element. Leonardo abandons the narrative and memorial dimensions to embrace scientific and mechanical investigation. His annotations, characterized by incisive and concise lines, render the perpetual motion of water, its receding and oscillating, it's flowing in channels or rippling on the surface. With ink, Leonardo captures the time and incessant movement of this element, isolating it from the personal context to study it



as a dynamic object, subject to the laws of physics and mechanics.

While Ma Yuan represents the “accents” of water in their poetic pregnancy, Leonardo breaks down its structure, moving from the optical dimension to the physical and metaphysical. In his manuscripts, water is no longer a vehicle of memory, but a pure object of knowledge, an element that reveals its vital qualities only through experimental observation and graphic rendering.

Ma Yuan's legacy is reinterpreted and amplified by Song Mingyuan 宋明远 (1938–), who undertakes a decisive evolution: from the aesthetics of the great terrestrial civilization to the status of maritime civilization. Under his brush, the sea is no longer a simple horizontal extension of the in-

finite but becomes a vehicle for a concept akin to the Western sublime, conveying the idea of depth, mystery, and grandeur (fig. 5).

Inspired by the Italian Renaissance, Song Mingyuan introduces a third dimension – the temporal one – which places the sea in a vital and eternal flow. His representations, enriched by volume, light, and shadow, are no longer simple lines, but bodies of water that resonate with modern science, capable of expressing power and movement.

In contemporary art, water makes the definitive leap: from narrative backdrop it becomes a sensory protagonist, at the center of immersive and spiritual experiences. The video medium, in particular, introduces what we might call a “fourth dimen-

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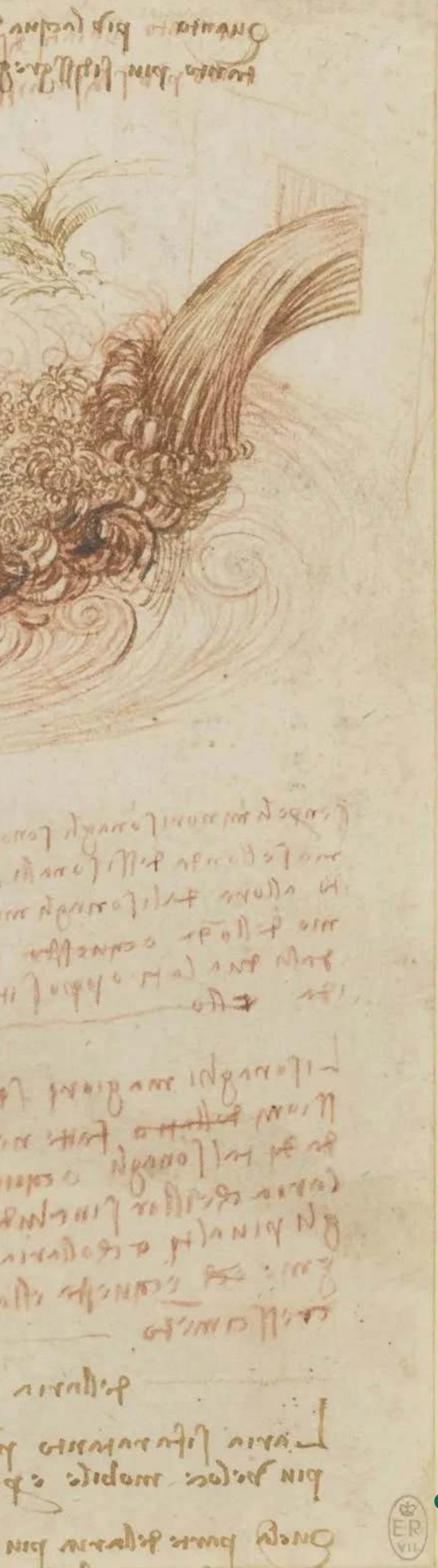
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Leonardo da Vinci, *Studies of Water*, c. 1508-1513, Royal Collection, Windsor Castle, pen and ink on paper

sion” – time within time – which painting and photography had only attempted to suggest.

An exemplary case is the Chinese visual artist Chen Qi 陈琦 (1963–), who in his water-printed woodblock print *2012 Generation and Diffusion*, 2012生成与弥散 – a 56-meter work composed of 240 matrices – the work features seemingly endless waves rendered across its vast surface, generating an immersive perceptual experience for the viewer (fig. 6).

The theme of choice – between oblivion and rebirth – finds one of its most profound interpreters in the American artist Bill Viola. In *Ocean Without a Shore* (2007), presented at the 52nd Venice Biennale, water falls like rain, offering subjects who cross this veil the possibility of returning to life. The faces, initially blurred and discolored, become sharp and gain color, revealing awareness of their being through expressions of dismay and terror. Water thus becomes a metaphysical boundary: crossing it means rediscovering existence, while remaining on the surface corresponds to a different poetic choice, that of modifying the ecosystem by leaving perishable traces.

The performative dimension of the relationship with water is explored by Zhang Huan 张洵 (1965–) in *To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond* (1997) (fig.7). In this performance, forty workers immerse themselves half-naked in a lake, physically raising its level with their bodily presence. The action demonstrates that the only authentic way to connect with nature is to let oneself be influenced by it on one's own body. However, every human intervention modifies the natural course of things, leaving ephemeral traces that, precisely in their fragility, reverberate collectively in existence.

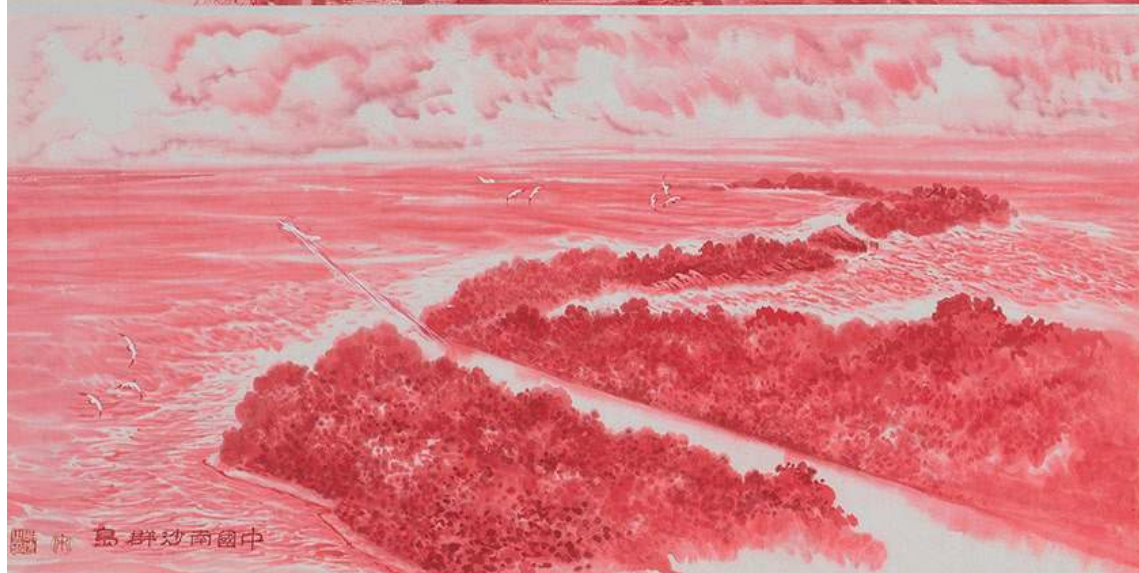
取得了举世瞩目的伟大成就。今天的人民海军正以全新的姿态屹立于世界的东方。

敬录习近平主席二〇一八年四月十二日在南海海训海上阅兵时的讲话

戊戌夏月余时遂於北京



中國南海群島



中國南海群島



戊戌夏月
余时遂
於北京

向海图强

在中国共产党坚强领导下，人民海军一路劈波斩浪，纵横万里海疆，勇闯远涉大洋，大踏步走上时代发展潮流。



中國台灣島



中國釣魚島



The human will to control and modify nature, to enclose it in artificial spaces, is at the center of the work of the young Italian artist Pino Pascali. In *32 Cubic Meters of Water* (1967) (fig.8), the artist uses thirty galvanized aluminum tanks to contain 2,400 liters of re-colored water; similarly, in *River with Triple Mouth*, rectangular tanks full of water and surfaces covered with earth create an intimate and personal dialogue with the liquid element. Water, enclosed in square or rectangular forms, becomes a mirror of Western man seeking answers about himself and the world. This gesture evokes a long cultural lineage that from Ulysses' journey reaches Caravaggio's *Narcissus*, up to the notion of liquid society theorized by Zygmunt Bauman.

Water configures itself as a transparent flesh, a mirror of the invisible world that surrounds us and of human memory. Always present and ever-changing, water shows itself as an autonomous and active presence, capable of embodying both oblivion and the passage to the other metaphysical shore. Its representation – from Neolithic ornament to digital installations, from Ma Yuan's masterful line to Leonardo's scientific studies – traverses the centuries without ever entirely abandoning the human present, revealing in turn its nature as a narrative medium, scientific subject, sensory protagonist, and finally mirror of consciousness. In the dialectic between East and West, water confirms itself as the symbolic place where poetry and physics, memory and oblivion, life and its transfiguration meet.



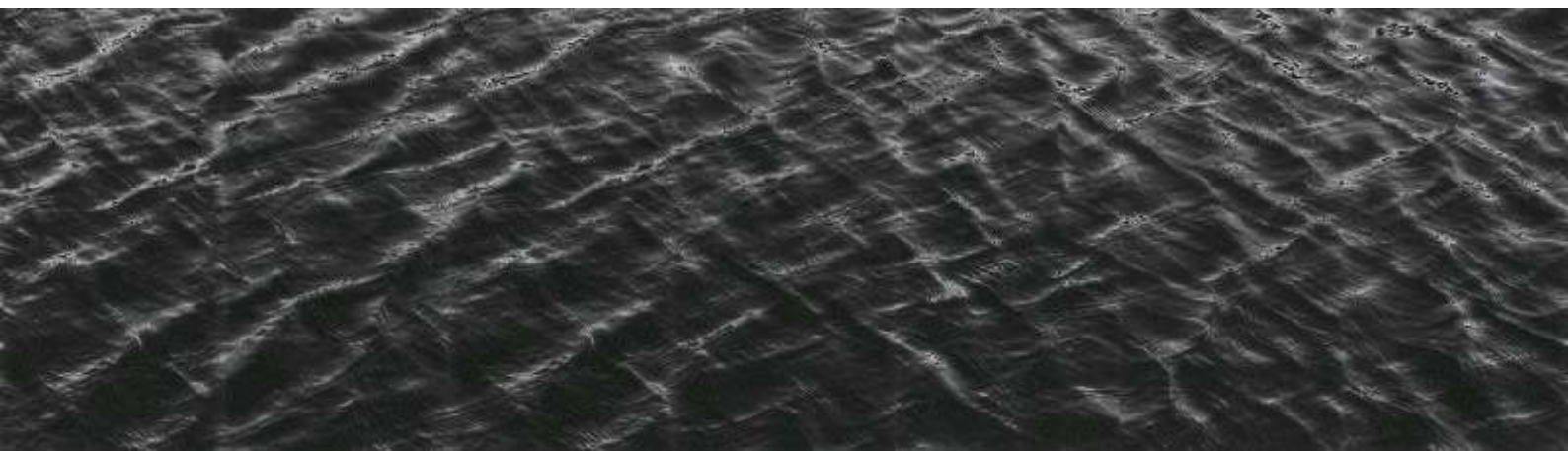
Zhang Huan 张洵, *To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond* (1997)

Chen Qi 陈琦



7). Video of the Performance, Beijing, China

i, 2012 *Shengcheng yu Misan* 2012生成与弥散 [2012 Generation and Diffusion], 2018, water-printed woodblock, 380 × 5600 cm



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