



# STROKE OF GENIUS

Not restricted to staid scrolls or archaic antiques, calligraphy comes to life through the energetic free-form brushwork of Chinese contemporary artist Wang Dongling, ZARA ZHUANG discovers

WANG DONGLING DABS a stout brush pen repeatedly in a dish of black ink with an expression of concentration. After a few moments of contemplation, he pens character after character with great flourish, the brush bristles dancing across paper

and leaving a trail that's sometimes wispy and hesitant, and others, bold and decisive. When Wang, 71, puts ink to paper, the entire process plays out like a piece of performance art. In fact, so sizable are most of his works that he is even known to lay his sheets of paper on the floor and walk across them wielding a brush pen the size of a mop. One of his largest pieces

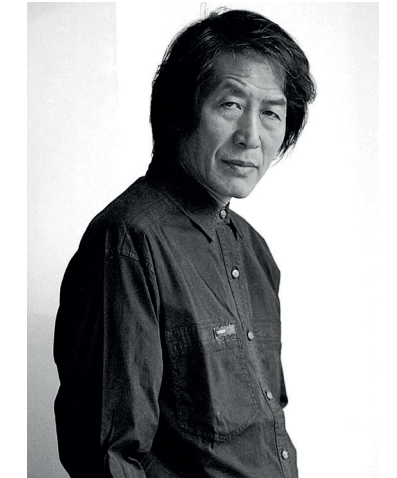
was the 7.5m-by-12.5m *Xiaoyao You*, an extract from Taoist text *The Zhuangzi* that took him two hours to write out before a live audience in 2003. Such is the experience of watching one of Chinese calligraphy's living greats in



action, who has exhibited across the world, from the Art Museum of China Academy Art to the Brooklyn Museum in the US and Gus Fisher Gallery in New Zealand. Rather than recreate the Chinese couplets especially ubiquitous during the Lunar New Year, with each character neatly ensconced in a square, Wang, who started out as a student of modern Chinese calligraphy masters Lin Sanzhi, Lu Weizhao and Sha Menghai, espouses a style of calligraphy that is seemingly frenetic. Loosely translated as "chaos script", his is even more abstract than the wildest of the five main styles of Chinese calligraphy. So instead of admiring the precision of discrete brushstrokes, one needs an interpretive approach to look beyond the actual words he paints, which are often presented as a nearly continuous, and at times almost illegible, stream of ink that twists and trails. "Calligraphy isn't merely writing

and it isn't only for [the Chinese-speaking world]. It's imbued with a 5,000-year history, but it's also modern — even when it's removed from Chinese characters, it can be a new trend of contemporary art," Wang explains ahead of his artist talk and live demonstration, as part of the exhibition titled *21st Century Calligraphy: Selections from the Nanshun Shanfang Collection*, presented by the Private Museum recently. (The showcase also featured works by established names such as Sun Xiaoyun, Wang Tiande, Wei Ligang, and Guan Jun.) "Appreciating traditional calligraphy is usually about understanding what the words mean, but calligraphy appreciation of the highest order is about the fluidness of form, composition, spatial proportion and emotions," he adds. Though teachings of ancient philosophy texts, from *Analects of Confucius* to *I Ching*, appear often in his works, Wang counts the neo-Impressionist movement and artwork by Modernist or Expressionist painters Paul Klee, Albert Bloch and Franz Kline as sources of inspiration — a fitting reference since his work bears some resemblance to Kline's austere black-on-white paintings. A pioneer of experimental ink calligraphy,

THIS PAGE FROM LEFT: WUYOU; NOTHINGNESS-BEING, SILVER SALT CALLIGRAPHY ON PHOTOGRAPH, WANG DONGLING; OPPOSITE PAGE: FLOWER OR NON-FLOWER, CHINESE INK ON PAPER



Wang calls himself a contemporary artist, and is known to incorporate technology and innovation in his works. Silver salt on photographic film is but one of his recent creations. And his 2015 *In the Realm of Zen* comprised white acrylic paint slathered over eight clear polyvinyl panels, suspended from the ceiling in a 3.7m x 3.7m x 3m formation. "For traditional calligraphy, people tend to go, 'There is a Li Bai poem here, I've read it before and it's profound, so this writing style is a good match,'" says the director of the Modern Calligraphy Study Centre at the China National Academy of Arts. "But you need not understand the words to appreciate its artistic beauty. For (his painting) *Drifting Snow*, it's two characters, but it's more about appreciating the fleeting ambiguity of change." Wang is confident that calligraphy will remain relevant in a world dominated by screens and keyboards. "It's a declaration of the hand. It offers a different form of enjoyment, so writing letters should be promoted, especially love letters. Those must be written by hand, no?"