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Dancer Andrea Nann looks back for new INK

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Although she's made a name for cutting-edge contemporary dance, Andrea Nann has found herself more and more drawn to a millennium-old, traditional art form. And she's found the perfect mentor in acclaimed Canadian artist and potter Wayne Ngan, who also happens to be a distant cousin from her father's home village in China. The two (who share the same last name with different English spellings) bonded not over the clay he's best known for, but over age-old ink painting.

Since childhood, the Vancouver-born Nann has travelled to Ngan's studio on Hornby Island, and remembers being fascinated by the only artist in her family on either side. "I felt like I was going to a completely different culture," Nann remembers nostalgically of the visits, speaking to the Straight over the phone from her home in T.O. before heading here this week. "And it's something I've been drawn back to over the years."

Now, Ngan and Nann's long artistic conversation is resulting in a new version of INK, a dancework inspired by the art form. Having first mounted it in 2003, Nann is now developing a film project around it with cinematographer Nick de Pencier. She and her team are working on it during a residency this week at the Dr. Sun-Yat Sen Classical Chinese Garden—which just happens to be hosting an exhibition of Ngan's ink paintings and pottery.

For Ngan, best known for abstract and contemporary work that's exhibited everywhere from Taiwan's National Palace Museum to the National Gallery of Canada, passing on his knowledge to a new generation has been rewarding. "The classical traditions are slowly dying, and there are very few ink painters anymore," the Chinese-born painter tells the Straight from his studio on Hornby. He stops to marvel that the ink paintings of Huai Su, an 8th-century calligraphy master, still resonate today. "For me, to know genuine Chinese culture has been very important for my own artistic development."

Tapping into the art forms of her ancestors has also been a key to Nann finding her choreographic voice. Ten years ago, long after she'd moved to Toronto to study and work, people were telling her that her dance pieces "had a very Asian aesthetic"—even though she had never studied traditional Chinese forms. That's when she decided to reconnect with Ngan, who suggested ink painting as a way for her to learn more about the culture.

Ngan says he began to show her, step by step, the process.

"It begins with walking and meditation, and we walked on the beach," Nann recalls. "He talked about wind and sand and water and elements around him."

The next important step is preparing the ink—grinding the black substance from a block and allowing your mind to empty and open to inspiration. "It is a deeper meditation to relax," the elder visual artist explains, adding this is when the image you want to express usually emerges. "At the same time you are grinding it, you should know what you are using the ink for."

From there to executing the brush strokes on rice paper, Nann began to see the intense comparisons with her dance practice. “There is so much preparation and tuning of the body that dancers go through that is not what people see or think of as dance—but it’s just as integral,” she says. “And with the rice paper, it absorbs ink so rapidly that if you don’t make the stroke with intention it just blobs and becomes a mess. As a choreographer, I spend more time qualifying the intention and much less time planning out the movement. My choreography comes from a lot of improvisation and a lot of reflection.”

Nann’s first version of INK was a solo, but she soon brought in dancers Alison Denham and Kate Holden for the 2003 work. They are reuniting for the research process at the garden, while visitors come and go from the beautiful urban oasis. The project culminates in a presentation called Inside Creation—INK on Thursday evening (July 25).

Ngan will also be there, demonstrating and getting visitors involved in ink painting during the event, while dancers show some of their explorations.

The goal is to create a storyboard for the film that will seamlessly bring together Ngan’s ink painting and Nann’s choreography—and that might ultimately be shot in China. For Nann, the evolution of the work has brought everything in her art and life together—like ink, brush, and paper.

“On a personal level it crosses into my ancestry, and on professional level it crosses into contemporary and traditional forms,” explains the artist, whose Dreamwalker Dance is now devoted to interdisciplinary work. “It’s really significant coming here as well. I’ve often come home and worked in Vancouver,” she says, pointing to Dancing on the Edge and the Asian Heritage Festival, “but it’s the first time I’m coming home to work in the Chinese community.”