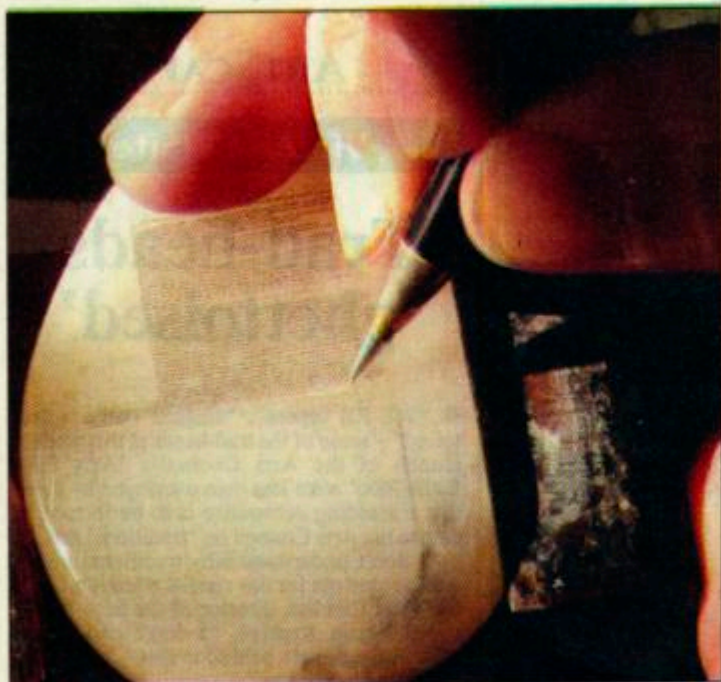


EAST MEETS WEST



● Chen Zhongsen carves minute text on to stone. He is giving his acclaimed *100 Pandas* sculpture, with 100 bears etched on a stone the size of an adult's middle finger, to the people of Ireland. Inset below left: *Written by the Waterside*, by Zhongsen. The work measures 35mm by 35mm

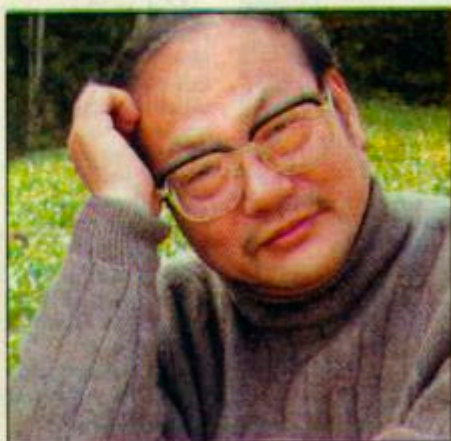
Making art without breathing

Carving poetry on to a strand of hair is just one of the feats of the Chinese micro-carver who is coming to Ireland, writes **Miriam Donohoe**

THE very idea of carving two poems on a single strand of human hair is beyond most people's comprehension, but this feat is typical of the work of a remarkable Chinese micro-sculptor who is joining forces with an Irish-based artist for a unique "East-West" exhibition which opens in Ireland next week.

The exhibition, in Sligo, will explore the influence of Eastern thought in art and will include micro-carvings, paintings and calligraphy by Chen Zhongsen, and large-scale figurative watercolours by Nick Miller.

Although the artists come from completely different backgrounds and cultures, they share common bonds. They both live and work in remote rural areas; Chen in a sparsely populated part of southern China's Fujian province and Nick Miller on the western edge of Europe in Co Sligo. But more significantly, they both channel their body's energy through meditation to assist them in their artistic



● Chen Zhongsen: his micro-carving is made possible by Buddhist meditation

Born into an intellectual family in China in 1941, Chen is a master of Chinese arts and is an accomplished calligrapher, painter, musician, scholar, philosopher and micro-carver and sculptor. He divides his time between his carving studio in Fuzhou, the capital of Fujian province, and his painting studio in the remote countryside of Yang Jia Xi.



Before he became an artist, Chen was a soloist with the Classical Chinese Music Ensemble at the onset of the 10-year Cultural Revolution which decimated so much of China's pre-

cious art. But he put those years of enforced isolation to good use, secretly perfecting his skills in painting, calligraphy and micro-carving.

Gentle and soft-spoken, his micro-carving is achieved through Buddhist meditation and the ancient Chinese breathing and energy-cultivation exercises known as qigong. Using a fine steel engraver, Chen does his carvings in an almost trance-like state on "longevity stone" which he gets from the mountains near Fuzhou. The meditation allows him to slow his heart rate and breathing to almost nothing, to give him control over his work.

Chen carves major Taoist and Buddhist texts and classical poems on such a minute scale that they are almost invisible to the naked eye and unreadable without strong magnification. Seen in enlarged form, the carvings are flawless.

On stones measuring only a few centimetres he has carved full versions of major texts including the Taoist "bible", the *Tao-Te-Ching* by Lao Tzu. This has more than 5,300 characters and is second only to the Bible in terms of global translation into other languages. He has also carved a Buddhist text, *The Diamond Sutra*, which has more than 5,200 characters. Undoubtedly one of Chen's most remarkable feats is a carving of two Tang Dynasty poems on a single grey strand of his wife's hair.

The work of the successful Sligo-based artist, Nick Miller, is strongly rooted in western figurative painting traditions and he has taught and exhibited his work all over the world. Keen on Chinese philosophy for years, he first developed an interest in t'ai chi, a Chinese martial art, when he was a teenager in London. He rediscovered t'ai chi much later when he moved to live and paint in Co Sligo.

The idea for the joint exhibition came from Miller and dates back to 1998 when he attended a t'ai chi workshop in Illinois in the US. His first encounter with Chen's work came there, when he was shown a small Chinese chop (seal) carved by the micro-sculptor with the full 81 chapters of the *Tao-Te-Ching*.

"It was like nothing I had ever seen or could imagine possible," says Miller. "My curiosity and excitement to understand its genesis led me deeper into Chinese culture than I had ever intended going."

Miller met Chen for the first time two years later in Oregon, where the Chinese artist was teaching calligraphy. There, both men were introduced to Beijing-based teacher Brian Flaherty, who has been the go-between, helping the two artists to bridge linguistic, cultural and geographical barriers. Last November, Miller travelled to China to finalise arrangements for the joint exhibition and also spent time watching Chen at work in his studio in Fuzhou and in the countryside.

Miller's accidental rediscovery of t'ai chi in



Sligo renewed his experience of living and painting. The joint exhibition will feature his large-scale watercolour paintings, which centre on figures in a dynamic field of colour. He feels his

work represents a powerful synthesis of western observational painting and the eastern understanding of energy cultivation, movement and meditation.

Despite the huge cultural differences, Chen is confident there is common ground between both artists' work. Art, he says, has no boundaries and he is particularly excited about coming to Ireland.

"Because my art is unique, I do not expect people to understand it too easily. The best way for people to have some understanding for my micro-sculpture is to see it in action."

One micro-sculpture Chen will be bringing to Ireland is his acclaimed *100 Pandas* piece, with 100 bears etched on a stone the size of an adult's middle finger. A similar piece sold to a Japanese collector for \$150,000 last year, but his micro-carvings start at \$500.

Chen says he will be donating the Panda piece to the President, Mrs McAleese, as a gift to the people of Ireland, to be put somewhere it can be seen by the public.

Miller believes the joint exhibition will

give people the chance to see another side of China: "We are used to seeing Chinese takeaways, but not too many people are aware of China's history and culture. The exhibition will help to change that."

● Sligo: the *Chen + Miller: East-West* exhibition is at the Model Arts and Niland Gallery from April 19th to June 3rd. For details of talks, tel: 071-41405

● Dublin: Chen Zhongsen's *Micro-Carvings and Paintings* exhibition is at the Rubicon Gallery, St Stephen's Green from May 8th to June 1st. For details of talks and a workshop, tel: 01-6708055



● Nick Miller: joint exhibition inspired by Chinese culture. Inset above right: *Zing* or sexual-essence