

A Literati Dialogue Through Lens and Brush

Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen

“A mountain without haze and clouds is like spring without flowers and grass. If a mountain is without clouds, it is not refined; without water it is not charming. Without paths it is not living; without forests it is not growing. Without deep distance it seems shallow; without level distance it does not recede and without high distance it stays low.”¹

Guo Xi (after 1000-ca. 1090), *Linquan gaozhi*

“From the standpoint of splendid scenery, painting cannot equal [real] landscape, but from the standpoint of the sheer marvels of brush and ink, [real] landscape is not at all the equal of painting.”²

Dong Qichang (1555-1636), *Hua zhi*

Arnold Chang (Zhang Hong, b. 1954, New York City) is one of the most accomplished contemporary practitioners of ink painting in the scholarly tradition. Michael Cherney (Qiu Mai, b. 1969, New York), a photographer of profoundly original vision, similarly imbues his work with the literati aesthetic. The two first met and appreciated one another's work while exhibiting in the 2007 Chengdu Biennial, which was dedicated to ink art. Cherney exhibited several remarkable accordion-folded albums of photos printed on *xuan* paper and Chang showed fine paintings that stood out for the elegance of his brushwork and subtlety of composition. Chang typically builds a coherent landscape composition

stroke by stroke, while Cherney deconstructs a photographic landscape image by reducing it to blurred lines and dots. The granular textures in Cherney's monochromatic images evoke the autographic brushstrokes of classical Chinese painting entirely by mechanical means. The two artists, who share a love of classical Chinese painting, happened to meet again in other group exhibitions, and by 2009 had launched their current artistic collaboration.

For lack of a better word we call their process a collaboration, but it is in many ways a contemporary evocation of the poetic dialogues that characterize some of the great moments of China's literary history. Michael Cherney, who lives in Beijing and travels extensively to photograph throughout China, initiates each piece by choosing a radically cropped black and white photograph to print on slightly textured *xuan* paper well-suited to painting. He shoots his photographs in black-and-white on high speed 35mm film, and they are then processed as slides, radically cropped, digitized, blown-up, and finally printed. For purposes of their collaboration, he has learned how to print digitally on painting paper, and usually prints the first small image as a hard-edged form surrounded by ample blank space. He then mails the printed sheets to Chang in New Jersey, who gradually composes responses to those that speak to

him. As the works in this exhibition attest, the images or their shapes that Cherney lays out are potentially quite challenging for a Chinese painter. For example, he radically crops a spectacular mountain expanse into a broad inverted pyramid. A striking image in its own right, it presents Chang with a geometric form never seen in Chinese painting, one perhaps conceived in reference to principles of Renaissance perspective. The painter responded twice, once by casually extending the image with a few matching mountains below the triangle. While such an abruptly cropped panorama seems to cry out for supplementation, the effect of Chang's sparse but artfully

positioned additions is completely unexpected—by breaking the boundary created by the triangle's two short sides with his soft texture strokes, mists and fog, he expands the scene infinitely, contradicting the apparent intention of the photo's hard-edged geometry with his fluid natural forms. In the second instance, he turned the photo upside down, prioritizing his own painting, and converting the printed image into a reflection of his painted mountainscape. The atmospheric perspective barely noticeable in the first photo is now conspicuous, readable as strange hills or beaches along a shoreline. Moreover, the entire composition, now viewed frontally rather than from above,

remains constrained by the long side of the triangle rather than infinitely expanded as in the previous example. In these examples Chang has directly commented on Cherney's art, and on the relationship of their common endeavor to the history of Chinese painting.

The shapes Cherney applies to other cropped images present different kinds of problems. In a few instances, his choice of image seems to offer a direct commentary on Chang's previous painting. For example, he sent a sheet on which he had printed images of waterfalls, a motif that appears in most early Chinese monumental landscape paintings, as though inviting Chang to make a painting that might look like one of his own earlier works. Rather than responding conventionally, however, Chang pushed back, completely avoiding such a centered composition by opening the center of the picture into a large lake and deconstructing the conventional landscape. In a second example, Cherney cropped the landscape to leave only a perfectly framed and balanced image of a tall, rectangular mountain peak that seems complete in itself. What could a painter possibly add to this? Chang again overturned expectations by surrounding Cherney's photo with mountains that lean to left and right, destabilizing and animating the previously perfect central mountain. No longer the tallest of the peaks, it still serves the crucial function of lending its silhouette to those that surround and echo it. Cherney launched an even greater challenge



Landscape with Waterfalls, 2016
Photography and ink on xuan paper
56 3/4 x 23 3/4 in.

in the format of the folding fan, a standard shape in Chinese painting, particularly for artists of the Suzhou area to which Chang's style might be traced. Typically, a landscape fan would leave ample blank space for the addition of poetic comments. Yet Cherney's diagonal image is so densely packed with dark, abstract forms that there is no room to add anything to it. In this case, Chang transforms the scene below the fan's

arc into a well-balanced rectangular landscape, diffusing some of the photo's uncomfortable tension, and even erasing the fan format altogether. Here, Cherney's photos can be read as commentary on or challenges to the classical tradition of Chinese painting, or in some cases as direct comments on Chang's body of work.

Previous interviews with Chang suggests the freedom he finds in this dialogue to fully exploit the art historical traditions in which he is so deeply grounded. “.rather than trying to imitate precisely the effect that Michael's granulated photos have, I realized that I'm not trying to paint to make it look like a Michael Cherney photograph. What I'm trying to do is paint those Chinese paintings that Michael's work reminds us of.”

The class of people referred to by historians as Chinese literati no longer exist in the contemporary world, but some of their cultural values remain appealing today. One of the fundamental principles of literati painting is that the work of art reveals the character and accomplishments of its maker. In this ideal, the virtues of the artist, namely his knowledge, intellect, philosophy, instincts, and training, would appear on the paper, and through their traces would enable those who saw the painting to mentally follow them back to their source in the mind of the artist. In Arnold Chang's brushwork all of these things, as well as the purity with which he has pursued his passion for the history and practice of Chinese painting, is indeed

exposed, but even so, how an exhilarating work of art emerged from them remains inexplicable. Michael Cherney, whose photographic process takes him out of his peaceful Beijing studio to the edges of snow-sprinkled precipices in all parts of China, demonstrates the literati virtue of reading 10,000 books and travelling 10,000 miles. These two, working in different forms of art, challenge the boundaries of their media, techniques, and concepts in many different ways, but each artist separately, and both of them together, achieve the calm and elegance of the literati aesthetic in their work.

¹ Susan Bush and Shih, *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*, trans. John Hay (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 170.

² James Cahill, *The Distant Mountains: Chinese Painting of the Late Ming Dynasty, 1570-1644* (New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1982), p. 122.

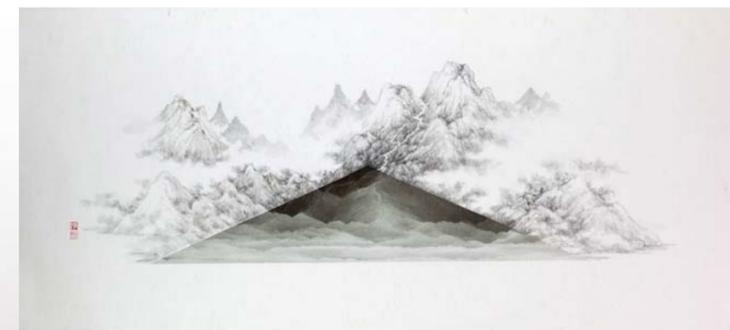
³ *From 2 Arises 3: The Collaborative Works of Arnold Chang and Michael Cherney, 2009-2014* (New York: Early Spring Press, 2014), p. 32.

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Perspectives 1, 2015
Photography and ink on xuan paper
24 x 58 in.



Perspectives 2, 2015
Photography and ink on xuan paper
24 x 58 in.

Arnold Chang

张洪 (Zhang Hong)

Arnold Chang (Zhang Hong 张洪), alias Juchuan (巨川), was born in 1954 in New York City. He is a native of Jiashan, Zhejiang Province. He studied art history with Professor James Cahill, and holds a master's degree from the University of California, Berkeley, and a bachelor's degree from the University of Colorado.

Primarily a landscape painter, Chang studied painting and connoisseurship with C.C Wang for twenty-five years. He also studied with Kuo Yen-ch'iao in Taipei and Wang Chi-yuan in New York. His landscape paintings have been exhibited internationally and are in the permanent collections of many museums, including The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The British Museum, Asian Art Museum, The Art Institute of Chicago, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Brooklyn Museum, Phoenix Art Museum, Norton Museum of Art, Crocker Art Museum, Yale University Art Gallery, Princeton University Art Museum, and Harvard Art Museums.

Chang has previously taught Chinese Art at the University of



Colorado, San Francisco City College, Arizona State University, and Columbia University. He has organized several exhibitions, and is the author of a book, and numerous exhibition catalogues and articles on Chinese painting. Chang served for many years as Vice President and Director of Chinese Paintings at Sotheby's, and was formerly a painting specialist at Kaikodo in New York. He is currently Senior Consultant for Chinese Paintings at Sotheby's.

Michael Cherney

秋麦 (Qiu Mai)

One would be hard-pressed to find a "more Chinese" artist than Qiu Mai (b. 1969). Photographer, calligrapher, and book artist, Qiu Mai's work is done with the great sophistication that draws on the subtleties of China's most scholarly and esoteric traditions. Based in Beijing and a successful artist whose works have been collected by The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Department of Asian Art (the first photographic works ever to enter the collection of that department), Qiu Mai's art is less provocative than it is intellectually engaging, meditative, and often simply beautiful. What is provocative is his identity: Qiu Mai is the Chinese name for Michael Cherney, born in New York of Jewish parentage. Cherney's work is the cutting-edge demonstration of artistic globalization: if Asian artists can so readily "come West," then what is to prevent large numbers of future Western artists from "going Asian"? Or, like Qiu Mai/Michael Cherney, going both ways at once, both American and Chinese, modern and traditional. – Jerome Silbergeld, P. Y. and Kinmay W. Tang Professor (Emeritus) of Chinese Art History, Princeton University.



Michael's works are in numerous museums and major private collections including The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Princeton University Art Museum and has been included in exhibitions at The Cleveland Museum of Art, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Asian Art Museum, Getty Research Institute, Peabody Essex Museum, Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard Art Museum, Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Berkeley Art Museum, Yale University Art Gallery, Middlebury College Museum of Art, and Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art, Hamilton College.



Saltscapes 1, 2017
Photography and ink on xuan paper
48 x 24 in.



Plateaus, 2012
Photography and ink on xuan paper
22 x 29 in.

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A Literati Dialogue Through Lens and Brush: The Collaborative Landscapes of Arnold Chang and Michael Cherney

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