A Literati Dialogue:
The Collaborative Art of Arnold Chang and Michael Cherney

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Many of the classics of Chinese poetry, calligraphy and painting were originally no more than brief episodes in an intellectual or aesthetic conversation between two artists, writers or scholars. Only occasionally intended as cultural monuments or masterpieces, they appeared in the moment of dialogue, when a writer or an artist composed a matched poem, a calligraphic frontispiece to a painting, a pictorial response or even a humorous riposte to a colleague's text. Such spontaneous aesthetic and spiritual communications did not need to be immediate or even to take place at the same event, but might capture in ink on paper the meeting of minds separated by vast distances. Poems, paintings and prose that documented responses to both philosophical and personal sentiments were conveyed back and forth by messenger and mail between close friends kept physically apart by duty and circumstance. Paintings now familiar to a wide public were often intended, at least initially, for the eyes and heart of just one appreciative fellow spirit.

The literati dialogue was, of course, the product of China's profound literary and artistic culture, and extended geographically as far as its practitioners might be scattered. The shared practice of capturing poetic, philosophical and painted compositions in indelible ink has preserved archival fragments of more than a millennium of such conversations. With the gradual disappearance of the classical practice of poetry and the evolution from writing brush to pen to keyboard by the late 20th century, such material traces have become increasingly rare. The artistic collaboration of Arnold Chang (Zhang Hong) and Michael Cherney (Qiu Mai) is a contemporary version of the literati dialogue, one that crosses the entire globe, from Beijing to New York and back again.

Chinese-American artist Arnold Chang is an accomplished and erudite contemporary practitioner of Chinese ink painting in the scholarly tradition. Beijing-based American photographer Michael Cherney, through a sensitive manipulation of images and materials, creates work similarly imbued with the Chinese literati aesthetic. The two artists were both born in New York City, Chang in 1954 and Cherney in 1969. They first met and appreciated one another's work when they exhibited in the 2007 Chengdu Biennial. Cherney showed several accordion-folded albums of photos printed on Xuan paper, and Chang showed paintings that stood out for the elegance of the brushwork and the subtlety of the composition. After exhibiting together in other group exhibitions, Chang and Cherney decided in 2009 to experiment with an artistic collaboration.

Although in contemporary parlance we would call their working process a collaboration, it is in many ways an evocation of the great poetic dialogues of China's cultural history. Cherney, who travels extensively throughout China to take photographs, initiates each piece of their collaboration by choosing a radically cropped 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, cropped, digitized, blown up and finally printed in his studio in Beijing. He had long printed his transformed photographic fragments on Chinese paper, leading most viewers to see in them direct parallels to Chinese painting. For the purposes of this collaboration, however, he has learned how to print digitally on the Chinese painting paper preferred by Chang, 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's studio near New York, and Chang gradually composes responses to those images that speak to him (Figs 1 and 2).

Although the two artists share a love of classical Chinese painting, from a technical perspective their work could not be more different. 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: he captures external images with the blink of his shutter. Chang allows landscapes to slowly emerge from his heart, mind and brush.

Chang suggested in an interview that he finds freedom 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' (*From 2 Arises 3*, 2014, p. 32). This, of course, is only possible for an artist with a great knowledge of art historical tradition.

Chang's interest in Chinese painting was inspired when, at the age of 9, he visited an exhibition of Zhang Daqian's (1899–1983) paintings in New York with his father. When he asked to learn to paint, his father arranged for him to study painting and calligraphy with the renowned Shanghai artist Wang Jiyuan (1893–1975), who lived in their Manhattan

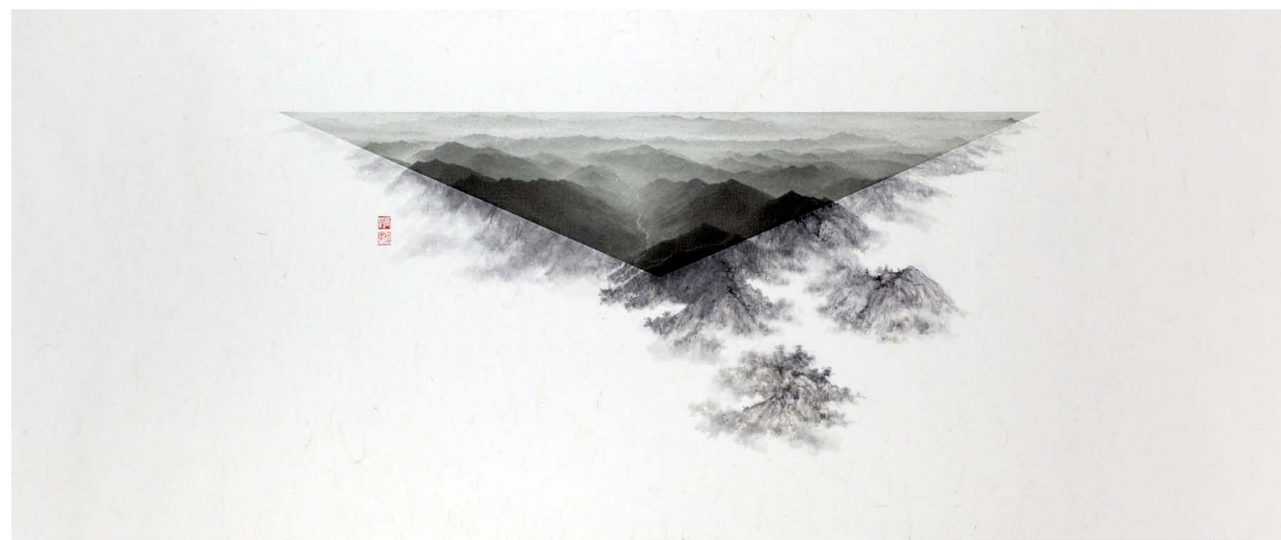

Fig. 1 *Perspectives #1*
By Arnold Chang (b. 1954) and Michael Cherney (b. 1969), 2015
Ink painting and photographic print on paper, 60 x 147 cm
Private Collection

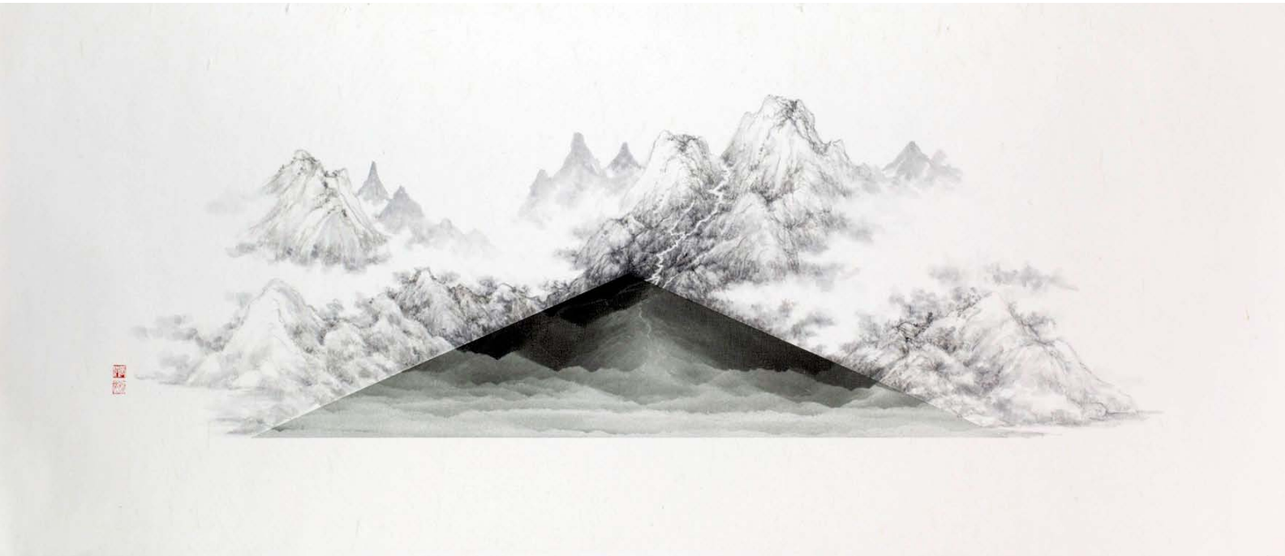

Fig. 2 *Perspectives #2*
By Arnold Chang (b. 1954) and Michael Cherney (b. 1969), 2015
Ink painting and photographic print on paper, 60 x 147 cm
Private Collection

neighbourhood. After graduating from The Bronx High School of Science, he renewed his interest in Chinese calligraphy by majoring in East Asian studies at the University of Colorado. He then studied traditional Chinese painting with Guo Yanqiao (1919–2015) in Taiwan and went on to graduate school at the University of California, Berkeley, where he studied Chinese art history with James Cahill (1926–2014). It was through Cahill's introduction that Chang met the artist, connoisseur and collector C. C. Wang (Wang Jiqian; 1907–2003), who was to be his painting teacher for the following quarter century. Chang's painting is informed by his knowledge of premodern Chinese painting, but for him tradition must speak as much to the future as to the past. 'There is a misconception about tradition,' he explains, '[which is] that people think tradition means "past". But actually, tradition is ongoing, and the opposite of tradition is not contemporary. One can be both contemporary and traditional, and in fact, in order to really understand the tradition it is imperative that you find a way to make it relevant and make it continue into the present and into the future' (Fu Qiumeng Fine Art, 2016).

Cherney, who was intrigued with Asia from childhood after listening to stories told by family friends from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan, studied Chinese and East Asian history at The State University of New York at Binghamton and in Taiwan. He then moved to Beijing, which has been his home since 1991. His interest in Chinese language and history and his long residence in China have given him an appreciation of its classical traditions and a passion for its great early landscape paintings. Unlike Chang, he chose to involve himself with the tradition not through the medium of painting but through photography. Cherney traces the beginning of his artistic practice to a period of recovery from a severe illness in 1993, which 'led to a desire to be more appreciative of life as well as more observant of my surroundings' (Tung, 2003). Coincidentally, a book about the work of his grandfather, Charles Hoff (1905–75), an award-winning photographer for the *New York Daily News,* was published during that period. The legacy of his grandfather inspired him to 'utilize the camera as a tool for proving to myself that I was thoroughly understanding what I was seeing in the world around me' (ibid.).

The works of both artists, although executed in different media, are imbued with an aesthetic of restraint and a subtle elegance that is parallel to the best of classical Chinese painting. Chang's paintings, with a contemporary feeling conveyed by his slightly surreal landscape compositions, are perfectly in harmony hanging in museum galleries alongside Yuan (1271–1368) or Ming (1368–1644) dynasty masterpieces. Cherney's appreciation of classical Chinese art is evident in the textures and imagery of his work. Moreover, he has an acute sensitivity to the affective power of the mounting formats of traditional Chinese painting, and his photographs, mounted as accordion albums, handscrolls or hanging scrolls, exploit their potential in highly contemporary ways.

Nevertheless, a shared interest in Chinese painting does not provide a method by which a photograph and a painting can be productively joined. The images and the shapes that Cherney lays out are, in fact, potentially quite challenging for a Chinese painter. In one example, he has cropped a spectacular mountain expanse into a broad inverted triangle. A striking image in its own right, it presented Chang with a geometric form never seen in Chinese painting, one perhaps conceived in reference to principles of Renaissance perspective. The painter responded twice. In the first work, he casually extended the image with a few matching mountains below the triangle (see Fig. 1). 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 employing soft texture strokes, mists and fog to break the boundary created by the triangle's two short sides, he has expanded the scene infinitely, contradicting the apparent intention of the photograph's hard-edged geometry with his fluid natural forms. In the second instance, Chang turned the photograph upside down, prioritizing his own painting and converting the printed image into a reflection of his painted mountainscape (see Fig. 2). The atmospheric perspective barely noticeable in the first photograph is now conspicuous, readable as strange hills or beaches along a shoreline. Moreover, the entire composition, now viewed frontally rather

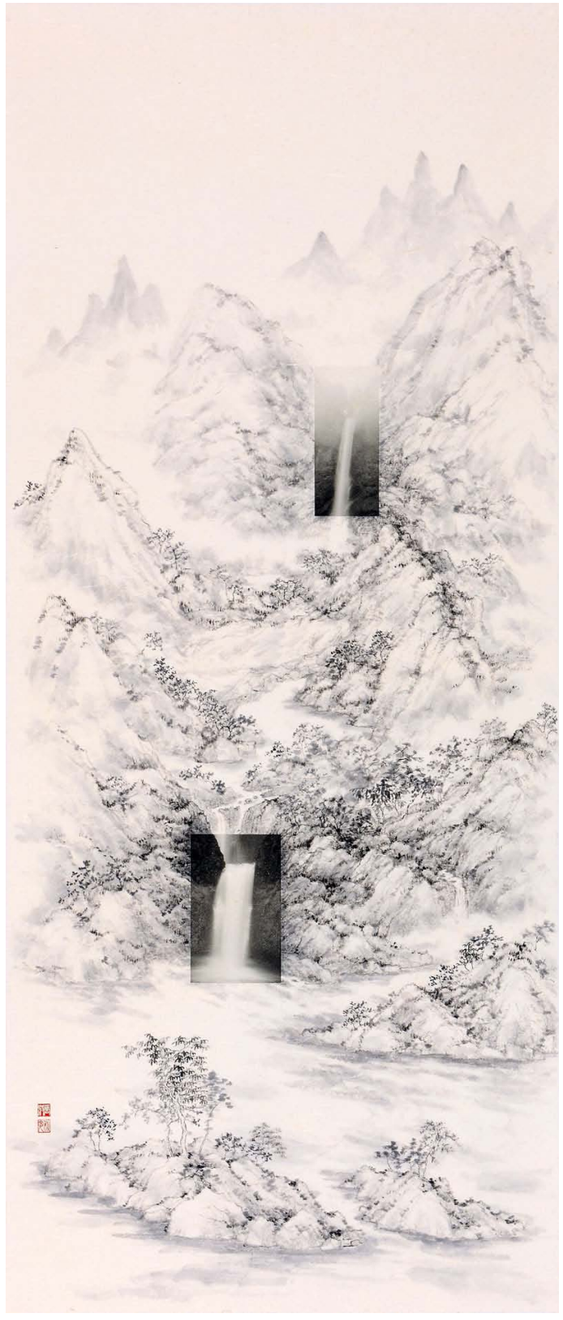

Fig. 3 *Landscape with Waterfalls*
By Arnold Chang (b. 1954) and Michael Cherney (b. 1969), 2016
Ink painting and photographic print on paper, 144 x 60 cm
Private Collection

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

Other cropped images present different kinds of challenges. In a few instances, Cherney's choice of image seems to offer a direct commentary on Chang's previous paintings. For example, he sent a sheet on which he had printed images of waterfalls, a motif that appears in most early

Fig. 4 *Da Ming Mountain 1*
By Arnold Chang (b. 1954) and Michael Cherney (b. 1969), 2016
Ink painting and photographic print on paper, 60 x 72 cm
Private Collection

Fig. 5 *Plateaus*
By Arnold Chang (b. 1954) and Michael Cherney (b. 1969), 2012
Ink painting and photographic print on paper, 56 x 74 cm
Private Collection

Chinese monumental landscape paintings, as though inviting Chang to make a painting that might look like one of his own earlier works (Fig. 3). Rather than responding conventionally, however, Chang pushed back, completely avoiding such a centred composition by opening the middle of the picture into a large lake and deconstructing the conventional landscape. In another piece, Cherney cropped the landscape to leave only a perfectly framed and balanced image of a tall, rectangular mountain peak that seems complete in itself (Fig. 4). What could a painter possibly add to this? Chang again overturned expectations by surrounding Cherney's photograph with mountains that lean to the 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 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 (Fig. 5). Typically, a landscape fan would leave ample blank space for the addition of poetic comments; yet this 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 balanced rectangular landscape, diffusing some of the photograph's uncomfortable tension and even disguising the fan format altogether. Here, Cherney's images can be read as challenges to the classical tradition of Chinese painting, or in some cases, as direct references to Chang's body of work.

The collaborative *Mountain Fire* has a particularly contemporary feel (Fig. 6). The luminous rocky surface emerging from the dark and densely textured mountain facade at its centre seems to exemplify Cherney's thinking about his own photography:

> Though the feel of my work leads to associations with the vocabulary of classical Chinese painting, there is still an important distinction: What is being seen in a photograph is indeed light as it existed for a moment in the physical world. This allows for a feeling of connectedness between the viewer and the essence of the physical world.
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> (ibid.).

Chang has responded to this intense physicality with a fantastic image, lightly touched with colour, in which the illuminated mountain bursts into flames. To the subject of forest fire—a rare one in Chinese art history—he brings the spontaneous and loosely executed brushwork characteristic of his landscape painting of recent years. He has long been a believer in the comprehensibility of Chinese painting in the context of abstract expressionism, and the textural quality of his seemingly relaxed brushwork in *Mountain Fire* may be seen as a reflection of an intuitive and extraordinarily self-expressive urge in

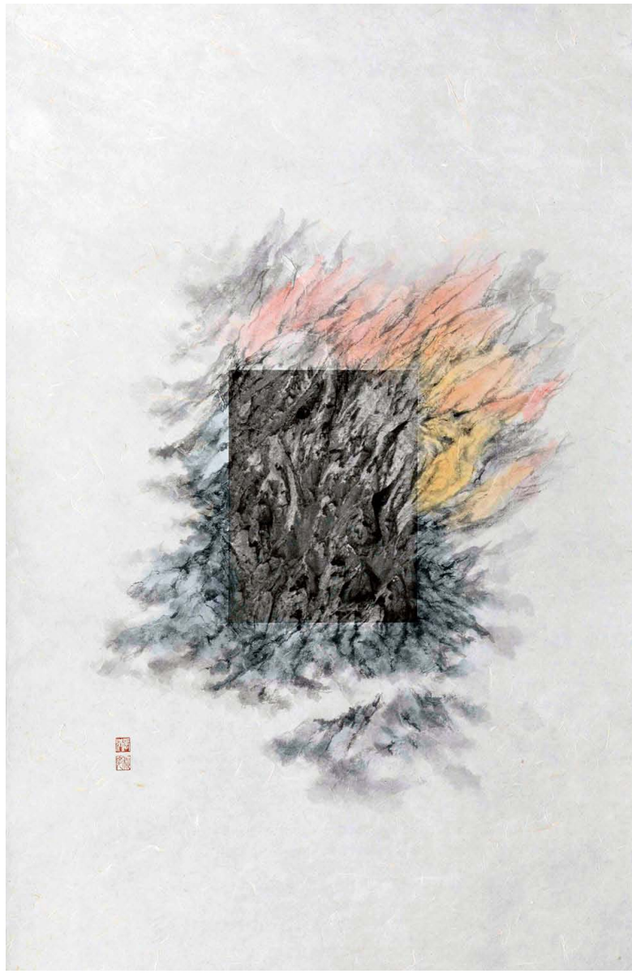

Fig. 6 *Mountain Fire*
By Arnold Chang (b. 1954) and Michael Cherney (b. 1969), 2012
Ink painting and photographic print on paper, 112 x 60 cm
Private Collection

his work of the past 7 or 8 years. For a commission exhibited at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston in 2010, for example, he chose to pair his work with a drip painting by Jackson Pollock (1912–56) that was displayed flat, as though in a handscroll case (Fig. 7) (Hao, 2010, p. 20). In his choice of Pollock, Chang made an implicit suggestion that the best painting in the literati manner might correspond to the self-expression found in 20th century modernism. Since the beginning of the Chang–Cherney collaboration, however, the duo has pushed into 21st century concerns.

The indexicality of the photographs that Cherney prints, despite their radical cropping and the controlled transformations caused by greatly enlarging the images, may suggest the specificity and detail found in the writings of landscapist Guo Xi (after 1000–*c.* 1090), from a period when creating a persuasive image of the physical world was highly prized:

> 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.
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> (Guo Xi, *Linquan gaozhi* [*Lofty Record of Forest and Trees*], trans. John Hay, in Bush and Shih, 1985, p. 168)

Chang's artistic method, on the other hand, brings forth landscapes that only exist in his imagination. As the late Ming master Dong Qichang (1555–1636) wrote:

> 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.
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> (Dong Qichang, *Huazhi* [*The Meaning of Painting*], in Cahill, 1982, p. 122)

Athough the class of Chinese literati—men with a common classical education and aspirations to fulfil the duties of the imperial scholar-official—ceased to exist after the fall of the Qing empire (1644–1911) a century ago, some of their cultural values remain compelling in the contemporary world. 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 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, are indeed exposed. Cherney, whose photographic process takes

Fig. 7 *Brushwork Study for Reorienting Pollock*
By Arnold Chang (b. 1954), 2008
Handscroll, ink on paper, 48.3 x 187.3 cm
Private Collection

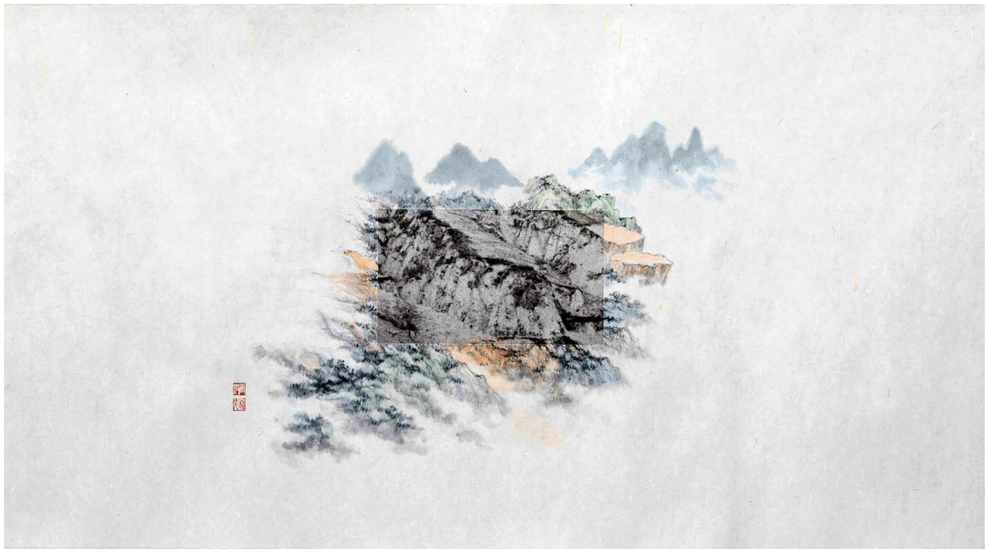

Fig. 8 *After Huang Gongwang #6*
By Arnold Chang (b. 1954) and Michael Cherney (b. 1969), 2014
Ink painting and photographic print on paper, 60 x 112 cm
Private Collection

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' (Fig. 8). These two artists, working in quite different ways, challenge the boundaries of their respective media, techniques and concepts. Despite their differences, both artists—separately, and in collaboration—achieve the calm and elegance of the literati aesthetic in an extraordinary contemporary form.

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The collaborative works discussed in this article will be on view in the exhibition 'From Two Arises Three: The Collaborative Works of Arnold Chang and Michael Cherney' at the University Museum and Art Gallery of The University of Hong Kong from 2 March to 6 May 2018.

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