

Michael Cherney's *Ten Thousand Li of the Yangtze River*

Tiffany Beres

The appeal of traditional Chinese landscape painting is that works are intended only as hints at the potential that the real world has to offer; where the image lingers in a state between the manifest and the void. My hope is to imbue photography with this sense of the rise and fall of the ten thousand things.

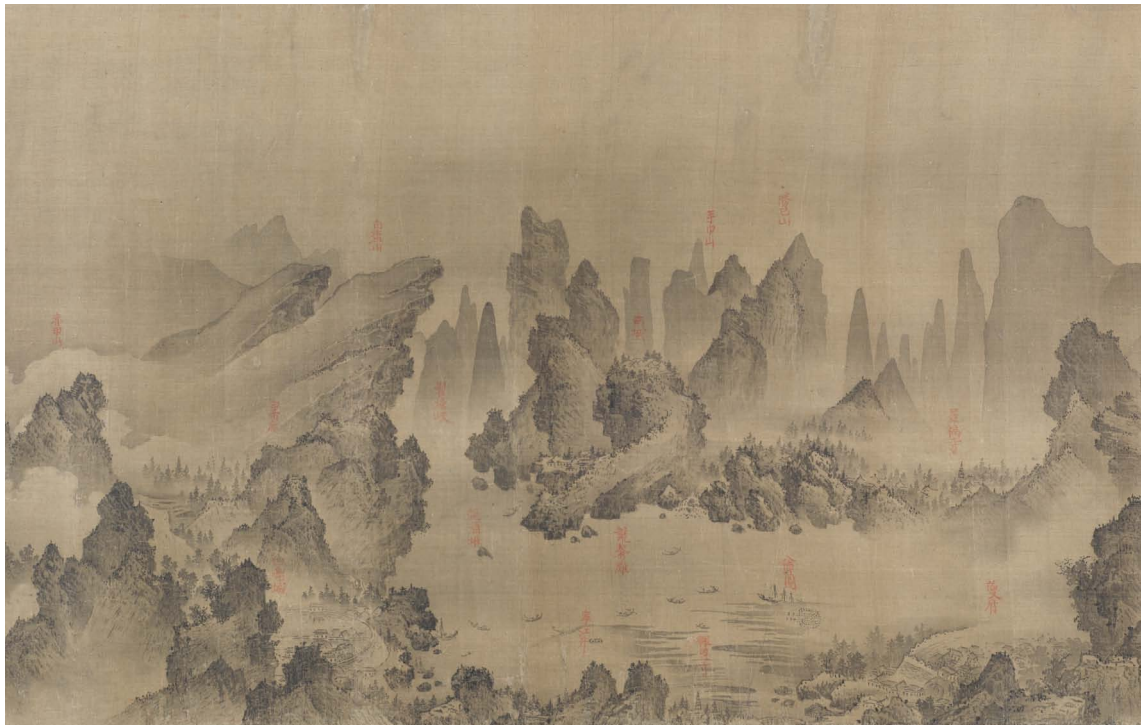
Michael Cherney

For more than two decades, Michael Cherney has created works of art for people who embrace Chinese culture, referring not to the hackneyed notion of 'Chineseness', but rather to the rarefied aesthetic traditions of China's thousands of years of art history. Cherney, also known as Qiu Mai, or 'Autumn Wheat', was born in New York in 1969. His deeper interest in China evolved as he studied Chinese language and history as an undergraduate in the late 1980s. Using his education as a jumping-off point, Cherney began creating photographic works inspired by Chinese art history and eventually moved to Beijing in 1991, where he is still based. His works, which can broadly be defined as photo art, take the form of exquisitely crafted scrolls, books and albums that can now be found in the permanent collections of such institutions as The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Getty Research Institute, the Princeton University Art Museum, and the Arthur M. Sackler Museum at Harvard University.

In 2013, Cherney completed one of his most ambitious projects to date: a series of 42 photographs that pays homage to the Yangzi river—one of the longest rivers on earth, and major wellspring to the



(Fig. 1) Michael Cherney photographing
near Fuchi, Hubei province, 2011
(Photograph: Lopsang Samten)



(Fig. 2) Detail of *Ten Thousand Li of the Yangtze River*
China, Song dynasty (960–1279)
Handscroll, ink on silk
Width 44 cm, length 1650 cm
Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution
Gift of Charles Lang Freer (F1911.168)

culture and economy of China (Fig. 1). Cherney's *Ten Thousand Li of the Yangtze River* was inspired by a Song period handscroll of the same title housed at the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, DC (Fig. 2). The Yangzi has been a theme in Chinese art and poetry for centuries, but what makes the Freer painting particularly interesting for Cherney is its dual function as a map. This long handscroll, measuring around 16.5 metres, details the geography between the Min mountains in Sichuan province (once thought to be the river's source) to the Yellow Sea, and is marked with 240 corresponding place names written in red ink. In January 2010, Cherney embarked on a journey to follow the course of the river, beginning at its true geographical source—Qinghai province (Fig. 3)—while also revisiting some of the sites featured on the handscroll to draw new artistic inspiration and record the river's present-day condition.

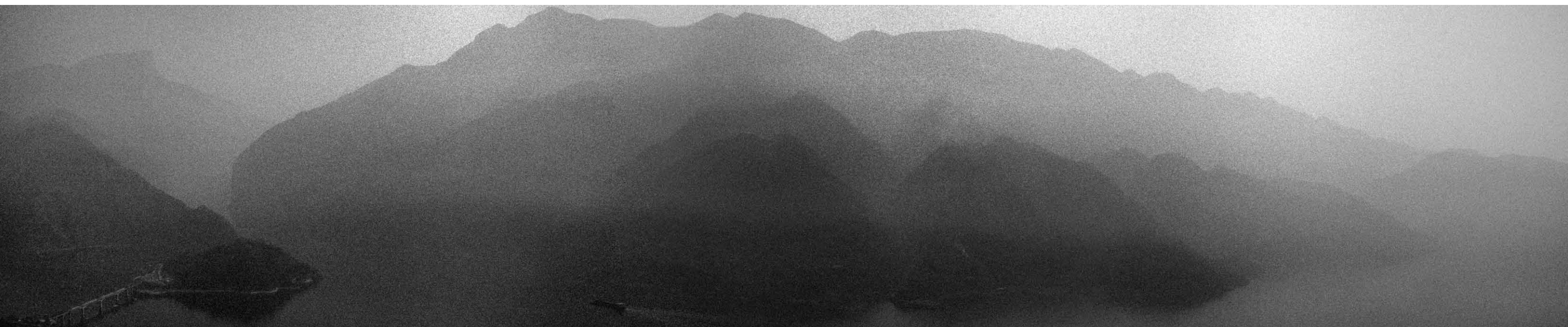
Using the ancient place names on the Freer scroll as a starting point, Cherney appropriates modern cartographic processes: while many of these sites have disappeared or their names have changed, through historical research and online image searching and mapping, he was able to determine the GPS coordinates of various locations that enabled him to photograph the river from the best angle—

rather than from the limited perspective of the river's surface. He then worked backwards to assess the locations' accessibility. Over the course of three years, Cherney took six trips to visit sections of the river, tracking the Yangzi through the eight provinces it traverses, sometimes revisiting locales when conditions were not ideal.

It is interesting to compare Cherney's portrayal of the Three Gorges section of the Yangzi river to that of the Freer scroll. Cherney's 'Kui Fu' was taken during a winter visit to Fengjie, Chongqing municipality (Fig. 4). His choice of this location is particularly iconic, because a stylized version of this panorama is also used on the 10 Renminbi note. The mist-shrouded mountains in Cherney's photograph maintain all their evocative power, rather jaggedly painted on the Freer scroll (see Fig. 2). It is important to note, however, that the difference in height between the photographed and the painted mountains is not just the result of pictorial exaggeration: in recent years, water levels in the area have risen as a result of the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, more than 160km downstream from this spot. For this reason, we see a recently constructed bridge in Cherney's photograph that now constitutes the main access to Baidi Temple—one of the marked sites in the Freer scroll that is visible in

(Fig. 3) 'Tuo Tuo River'
By Michael Cherney (b. 1969), 2013
Photographic print on Xuan paper, handscroll format
Width 27.5 cm, length 410 cm





(Fig. 4) 'Kui Fu'
By Michael Cherney (b. 1969), 2013
Photographic print on Xuan paper, handscroll format
Width 27.5 cm, length 376 cm

the lower left-hand corner of both images.

Encompassing the Yangzi from its headwaters on the Tibetan plateau in western Qinghai province, down through the Three Gorges and its descent into the flatlands until it finally enters the sea, the 42 works that comprise Cherney's *Ten Thousand Li* have been created using a very different process from that which the artisan painter used to produce the Freer scroll. Armed with a Leica M6 and GPS, Cherney records moments from the environment he is witnessing. According to the artist, 'the primary driving force behind my thematic work [is] to look upon a

place imbued with a vast (sometimes daunting) accumulation of history and cultural memory, and then to capture one instant, fleeting, tangible moment of it with a photograph.' Since Cherney uses black-and-white film, rather than digital, he does not know exactly what he has captured until he sees the negatives. In this regard, there is a certain unpredictability to his method—he cannot control the feeling the location evokes on a given day, or emulate the painted world from the classics. All he can do is take in the visual experience of his journey and translate this impression in his final selection.

After Cherney returns to his studio, he selects and scans the negative that he feels best represents a particular scene. He then edits, without altering, each image digitally by masking, cropping and enlarging, to evoke the mood of the location. Each resulting photograph remains a pictorial map—no matter how abstract or minute an excerpt it is from the context of the world that surrounds it.

And what a world he has captured. Cherney's photographs depicting the sources of the Yangzi river—'Tuo Tuo River' and 'Min Mountains'—have a primal feel to them, as do those moments when we

(Fig. 5) 'Tiger Leaping Gorge'
By Michael Cherney (b. 1969), 2013
Photographic print on Xuan paper, handscroll format
Width 27.5 cm, length 512 cm





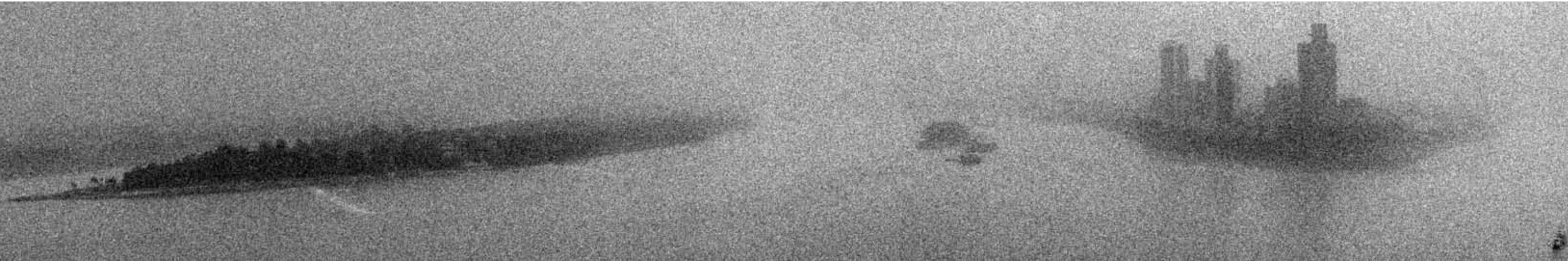
(Fig. 6) 'Chongqing Fu'
By Michael Cherney (b. 1969), 2013
Photographic print on Xuan paper, handscroll format
Width 27.5 cm, length 435 cm

see the river in its most commanding presence—such as 'Tiger Leaping Gorge', shot at a panoramic angle as the river rages through the canyons of Yunnan province (Fig. 5). But the majority of Cherney's photographs demonstrate how nature has given way to the footprint of man. There are several images of the river in which it seems engulfed by urban towers of concrete, such as 'Pan Zhi Hua' or 'Chongqing Fu' (Fig. 6). There are also several sites where the river's waters and its surrounding landscape have become the raw materials for nearby mining and manufacturing, such as 'Fu Chi' or 'Jiang Yin'. Although Cherney himself

takes the detached stance of observer, a viewer of his work is left with the feeling that China's development is changing the very course of nature itself. All of Cherney's photographic maps tell a story, but certain selections reveal both the artist's eye and his interpretative vision. In 'The Great Buddha', for instance, the former site of the classical Buddha at Leshan in Sichuan province in the Freer scroll no longer exists, but here, in Cherney's slightly blurry image, enlarged to the point where the film grain is prominent, some of the buildings impose an almost supernatural presence on the scene (Fig. 7). Another

of the photographer's personal favourites, 'She Mountain', is particularly disquieting because, in contrast to the work's title, only the faintest outlines of mountains are discernible in the background. Instead, Cherney has chosen to draw attention to the river filled with dredging barges, which might literally be carrying the mountains away in spoil. 'Gui Xia' also stands out from the other photographs in Cherney's series because of its abstract qualities (Fig. 8). When he arrived at the site of the Three Gorges Dam in Sandouping, Hubei province, Cherney found that the monolith was completely devoid of aesthetic

(Fig. 7) 'The Great Buddha'
By Michael Cherney (b. 1969), 2013
Photographic print on Xuan paper, handscroll format
Width 27.5 cm, length 407 cm





(Fig. 8) 'Gui Xia'
By Michael Cherney (b. 1969), 2013
Photographic print on Xuan paper, handscroll format
Width 27.5 cm, length 470 cm



(Fig. 9) The completed photographs are mounted as handscrolls and set in handmade boxes

interest. Instead of just moving on, he stayed and took a photograph of the site at night. After developing the negative he inverted the image, so that black appears white and white appears black. The final result, simple and suggestive, appears like ink drops on paper.

Playing with the very concept of 'medium', Cherney's photographic works also have another striking quality: their Chinese painting-like presentation. After cropping and enlarging the images, he prints them in pigment ink on Xuan paper; thus the completed works can be handled and mounted in the same way as traditional ink paintings. Each of the 42 works is presented as a handscroll, whose narrative unfolds as the scroll is unrolled. The texture of the paper's surface, the grain of the enlargements that resembles ink wash on paper, and the surrounding silk mounting all give the works a semblance of classical painting. Post-mounting, when trimmed with the artist's colophons and set in a handmade box, each photographic work feels like a complete object (Fig. 9). Such features transform Cherney's work into something that resonates beyond the photographed image, and which is both modern and yet connected to history.

There are those who believe that 'Chinese art' can only be produced by someone of Chinese descent, but Michael Cherney's oeuvre stands in defiance of this notion, building upon the aesthetics and craftsmanship that have grown out of millennia of historical development within China:

Art history is an important component of all of my works, both in content and form. In relation to subject-matter, rather than looking at recent history alone (a matter of decades) I try to utilize the advantage of the Chinese landscape, which allows for contrast between recent history and ancient history.

There is a Chinese proverb, *pang guan zhe qing* (lit., 'the onlooker sees clear'), which suggests that one can sometimes have a better view from the outside than from within. Always on the outside, both as a Westerner and as a photographic observer, perhaps it is the complexities and questions that Cherney raises that give his works their depth. As he puts it, 'When creating art, I simply find inspiration in a certain aesthetic, a rich history, and, most important, in nature, which bestows its gifts in equal measure to all.'

Tiffany Beres is an independent Beijing-based curator and art historian.

Works from Cherney's Ten Thousand Li of the Yangtze River will be on display at The Nelson Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City from 2 August 2014 to 1 February 2015. Between July 2014 and February 2015, the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco will also be showcasing collaborative works by Cherney and painter Arnold Chang. Additional information and images can be found at the artist's website, qiumai.net.