

## 55. Qiu Mai (Michael Cherney, b. 1969)

“Map of Mountains and Seas” series

Photography, ink on paper  
Mounted as a handscroll  
18.0 x 80.0 cm. (7 x 31 1/2 in.)



The artist explains the subject of this photograph: “a river running below a huge mountain of sand that has accumulated over millennia at a pass in the Kunlun Mountains; it lies at the border of China and Tajikistan in Xinjiang province.” Looking at a photograph by Michael Cherney, however, is not simply looking at a photograph by Michael Cherney. It is, rather, passing through a threshold into a unique world. Although taken by the artist out of our real world, and from a very specific place in it, the image is so unearthly in its aura that one hardly believes it’s attached to reality at all. Even if you’ve climbed dunes in Namibia, or watched the geologic wonder of the Rift Valley come at you as your four seater soars towards its edge, even as you’ve thought how unearthly is this, the image here is more so. Shadows and light; gossamer, diffused light; sharp, stinging light, shadows burrowing impossibly into a flat plane and rising to meet your eye.

The abstract nature of the image links the horizontal scroll to the late Southern Song paintings of the monk painters Muqi and Liang Kai. The late Song dynasty artists stray close to the border between representation and abstraction; but neither takes the step across into abstraction. And neither does Michael. While he is creative in the act of photographing his subjects and in printing the images, the subject remains sacred to him, “vast, natural, sacred, and esoteric.” Although we know that the image is that of a landscape, we feel it is also something else. It becomes clear with Michael’s explanation of the series of which this photograph is a part that the real and abstract are brought into unison here.

*Map of Mountains and Seas* is a photographic reflection on the *Shanbai jing*, the *Guideways through Mountains and Seas*, a text with versions dating back to the 4th century BC. The *Guideways* is a confluence of real and abstract geographies. Hundreds of mountains and waterways are mentioned, but only a handful of these can be ascribed to identifiable locations.... in between are vast imagined spaces, along with descriptions of the flora and fauna, medicines, beasts and mythical beings that dwell there. “

One might say then that the artist has “abstracted” the subject in many senses of the word: it is here “extracted, isolated, detached,” “a synopsis, résumé, summation,” and “theoretical, conceptual, metaphysical, philosophical.” We’ve come to expect nothing less from Michael.

Michael Cherney studied Chinese and East Asian history at the State University of New York at Binghamton, and studied further at the Beijing Language Institute and is a self-taught photographer, perhaps inspired by his renowned grandfather, the award-winning photographer Charles Hoff. Michael’s formal studies of Chinese and East Asian history, combined with his rigorous personal studies of China’s religious and art historical past, have resulted in his abiding appreciation and even reverence for China’s historical journey and its great classic tradition of painting, particularly

landscape painting. His relationship with China was deepened by residence in Beijing and for well over two decades extensive travelling in China where he was able to seek out the mysterious mountain haunts and specific sites that have historical or art historical relevance to his work or answer to a quest for understanding nature and its working, and more simply to experience life in the modern city that is Beijing. A carefully selected subject, a photograph, painstaking cropping, and printing on a special paper, together result in the compelling images we associate with his work, in the present one with a deep philosophical underpinning.