

BECOMING LANDSCAPE:

Chimeric Unfoldings in the New Work of Zheng Chongbin

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Static line can be rendered as motion. The curving arc of water forming waves in a painting can move without moving. Its movement is latent, implied, understated, understood. The stark dynamism of waves from a classical ink painting shares a secret language of form with dancing waves of neon that leap and surge with a mounting intensity as the current accelerates. Roiling white water offers an incantation of forms found in nature. Swirling bubbles emerge from water black as ink. The fractal language of ink maps onto aerial views of mountain that stretch themselves outwards across space at the lithic speed of geology, unfolding into ordered ranges of stolid persistency, yet moving—like the waves and the water—nonetheless.

The expanding ink blot that recurs in *Chimeric Landscape* opens into time and space like the mouth of a black hole, or the pupil of an eye, opening to consume light. It is both aperture and void. Out of the void and the chaos of entropy, emerges a landscape of homologous topologies—geometric properties and spatial relations that share a common structural logic or shared formal ancestry. There is an immanent rhythm to its movement and a mysterious yet rigorous logic to its modes of transformation. Like the mythological creature, the chimera, it is both hybrid and shape-shifting, and it bears the genealogies of multiplicities within itself.

To encounter *Chimeric Landscape*, you must take an active stance, positioning yourself in relation to the images that unfold before and around you, changing aspects of what you see depending on your location. You may sit or stand in the darkened room. You may close your eyes and allow the soundscape to wash over you as it dilates and contracts on a changing temporal scale. First there is sound—a tremulous, deep, bubbling slowed to near distortion. It is the sound of what is called in Chinese cosmology “*hun dun*” 混沌, the primordial soup that is the flux of all at the beginning of the universe, before form’s emergence.

When you open your eyes, you see that the walls and floor and ceiling of the room are burnished to a high gloss, and appear much like the surface of wet ink, such that they reflect the video from all sides, subtly distorting its imagery in the process.

You see and do not see the mesh scrim, hanging at a distance from the back wall, where the ever-changing, yet ever repeating imagery in the video component of the work is projected. The scrim forms a grid diffracting light, making the projection float and double ethereally. You see the scrim by not seeing the scrim, which limns the frontier where the analogue and digital worlds meet. Seeing it is a function of seeing the images that make it invisible, images made visible by their intra-action with the scrim, the intra-actions of light (of the projection) and darkness (of the room), combined with the dimmer lights bounced from the gleaming surfaces surrounding you. Seeing the scrim is also a function of the physics of diffraction that render it visible again; the morphing, multiple iridescent wakes thrown from the radiating interference patterns that emerge from the

in-between space where the merging and parting of waves mark one another in their collisions.

You watch the undulating *hun dun* of a cosmos on the verge of becoming, its void shape-shifting towards nebulous form. It shimmers before you like water, at first concealing then briefly revealing the meta-self-reflexive image of the edge of a laptop keyboard and a pair of hands. State of mind is always embodied; states of being are instantiated matter. We are minds embodied, and we are marked bodies made of more than merely matter. The morphologies of the world present emergent forms of order out of the entropic forces of chaos, in non-linear entanglements of myriad minds and multiplicities of matter unfolding across time and space.

Black bleeds into white with a liquid grace. The surface of the paper becomes mountain ranges, valleys, and striated ground, shuddering as it swells with ink. Contemplative pauses punctuate languid flowing ink rivers. Formless horizons sweep clean the frame, and reset the image stage, giving way to a hand holding an invisible brush, painting the shadow forms of mountains and water — *shan-shui*, the Chinese lexical rendering of landscape.

Somewhere between nature and culture, at the interstices of their millions of multiple, situated intra-actions, lie the real world of phenomena that we inhabit. The world of phenomena is neither merely mute, passive matter, nor is it the playground of God-like beings, as our species sometimes imagines itself. The world has its own language, and like ours that language is inherently polyglot, its meanings irreducibly heterogloss, its nature diverse in expression.

Although we often speak as if nature were outside of us, while culture is inside, one can just as easily argue the opposite. Phenomena are not the bedrock of “the real” existing outside of us, external to our minds, our sensory perceptual apparatuses, our languages and sign systems. Neither are phenomena mere phantoms of the mind projected onto meaningless and unknowable matter. Instead they exist in-between our ways of knowing the world and our being in the world, and they are consequential for both.

Just as the world of phenomena that *Chimeric Landscape* explores is not limited to the material or the mental, this landscape, unfolding into the space you are sharing with it, is not primarily composed of images, even as the work invokes them. Instead, his chimeric landscape is a series of structures, flows and natural processes that give way to shape-shifting forms that discover their shared genealogies and homologies in your mind, as their interlocutor. You must perceive them to realize they are both multiple and singular at the same time. This landscape is also a landscape of one and at the same time of many. It morphs between topographies and topologies, between surfaces and spatial possibilities, between outward form and inner structure. Ink landscapes resemble the same aerial mountain topographies that they reassemble themselves into.

When ink pools and floods, it is not mimicking water, but enacting its watery being towards new topological forms of becoming. The rushing river, the roiling bubbles, the trickling stream of ink, the rivers cutting through mountain ranges do not merely bear formal resemblances to one another based on superficial similar appearance; they are related to each other through the grammar of a complex

universe of which we are a participating part, and through intensities— —distinctive properties independent of the amount present in a given system, which function to characterize all kinds of matter; concentrations of energy immanent in each form of being, that spill outward and into forms of becoming.

You watch swarming red blood cells merge and morph into vermilion ink moving in rivulets across rice paper, swollen with fluid. The interior rivers of our bodies share intensive properties on the micro-scale with the behavior of flowing water bodies of the earth on a macro-scale.

Are we really so different, so separate from the physical world we inhabit and help shape? We are animal at the same time that we are human. We are composed of matter just as much as the mountains and valleys, forests and streams. There are landscapes of neurons inside of us that share the same fractal logic of form with galaxies. Mountain ranges and ink blots self-organize into the same formal patterns. Eco-systems of the planet and the microbiomes of our bodies at the bacterial levels share similar formal properties as well.

You perceive crystalline geometries of light and movement in water; diffractive wave patterns of constructive interference. You are pulled into a maze of neatly structured, anthromic, rectilinear lines that rearrange themselves into uncanny genealogies of roots and branch, a mutating garden of forking paths that fracture into rhizomatic root-scapes, before giving way to the vortex of rushing river currents that swirl and eddy in their precise-wild dance of mathematics and physics and topological transformation. The ordered chaos of motion and fractal

geometries shared by these chimeric landscapes are periodically punctuated by a visual reset that offers a brief void for the mind in which to relocate itself, before re-entangling your senses.

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Critic BIO

Beijing and New Delhi-based political cultural theorist, art critic and curator [Maya Kóvskaya](#) (PhD UC Berkeley, 2009) has two decades of combined experience in the Chinese and Indian arts and cultural worlds. An award-winning university-level teacher and independent scholar, she has authored, co-authored, edited, translated, and contributed to many books and articles on contemporary art as it intersects with the political, cultural and ecological. She has curated numerous international contemporary art exhibitions and public art interventions as well. She was the Beijing Director and Asian Art Advisor to the Faurchou Foundation (2012-2013) and currently Art Editor for [Positions: Asia Critique \(Duke University Press\)](#). She is conducting research for a book entitled *Shifting Grounds: Art Interventions, Political Ecology, and the Anthropocene in India*, and blogs on art and the Anthropocene, ecology, political theory, and philosophy of science at *Mutual Entanglements: Diffractive Notes on Art and the Anthropocene*: www.mutualentanglements.com.