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# PHOTOFAIRS

## International Art Fairs Dedicated to Photography



© Wu Chi-Tsung. Courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery (New York & Taipei)

Taiwanese 'on-the-radar' artist Wu Chi-Tsung speaks to PHOTOFAIRS ahead of the Shanghai fair this month, where he will be exhibiting his fascinating works with Sean Kelly Gallery (New York & Taipei).

Interestingly, Chi-Tsung clarifies during the interview that he does not identify as a 'photographer', instead, he merges and unifies his extensive knowledge of multiple mediums to create dynamic, tactile-looking, and memorable artworks. The dilemma, the artist states, of distinctly categorizing art forms (such as painting, photography and contemporary dance), results in a 'trapped' mindset, thus limiting the potential for artists to develop and challenge themselves. PHOTOFAIRS, as a world-class art fair, aim to promote artists such as Wu Chi-Tsung, who are pushing the boundaries of photography and posing the question of how should photography be defined.

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With an impressive portfolio including set-design, ink painting and video works, Chi-Tsung proudly represents what it means to be a contemporary artist in the 21st Century. We speak to the artist about breaking down barriers between mediums, the importance of preserving traditional methods and an exclusive step-by-step feature on how he creates the renowned 'Cyano-Collage' series...

***“Sometimes it worries me that we have abandoned too many valued experiences and methods in traditional art as we transform too resolutely.”***

**PHOTOFAIRS:** Your works display an exciting range of artistic mediums, such as painting, set design and photography. What is your thought process when deciding which medium to use for a project? What comes first, the idea and theme behind a project or the desire to use a specific medium?

**WU CHI-TSUNG:** Either way could be possible. Generally speaking, whenever I conceive a new project in any form, the language of painting is always my archetype. Every artist has his/her mentality, and painting is mine. For instance, the idea of 'randomness' from the eastern painting tradition (which partly is due to the nature of ink paints) is deeply rooted in me when I create my video installations and photography, like the Cyano-Collage series. I also imagine my art world via the spirit of paintings.



© Wu Chi-Tsung, *Cyano-Collage Series*. 2019. Courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery (New York & Taipei)

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**Part of PHOTOFAIRS' objective is to explore the dynamic nature of photography as a medium, which includes presenting video works, installations and performance art to our audiences. One focus of the 2019 Fair is performance art and photography. With a career that involved set/stage design in collaboration with various institutions and performances, such as 'Off the Map' (2013) and 'How Long is Now?' (2017), how important do you think it is to combine performance art with other mediums such as photography, design or installation?**

My experience in set design was mainly for contemporary dance. As dance itself might be abstract to many people, I consider it my duty to guide people to step into the world of the dance by visualizing certain elements. To me, what was the most difficult element of my job was to synchronize all the various elements on the stage. Every art form has its own time and space structure, and my duty is to organize everything to ensure they balance. For example, it is particularly difficult to apply videos to theatre, since the nature of the video is in the past, yet the performance is in the present. My experience in dealing with set design is similar to working with video installation; both require careful consideration of the relationship between the image and the space, and thus are more present than merely a single channel video.



© Wu Chi-Tsung, *Off The Map*, 2013. Set Design. Courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery (New York & Taipei)

**Your artistic journey began with painting, where you gained a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Oil Painting from Taipei National University of the Arts in 2004. What lessons did you learn from studying painting that you can transfer to your photography?**

It is an old tune if I talk about my understanding of painting. However, if I transfer it to another medium such as photography, new meanings are created, which is what I aim for when I work across different mediums. I find it odd that people have set categories of mediums due to functional concerns, which eventually become a mindset that has trapped the way we think. I always try to seek the universal relevance of things and create a dialogue to connect them. I would not consider myself to be specialized in photography. I use photography as a tool to contemplate and express my thoughts. In my photography works, a hint of how

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time flows from the exposure to the manual collage is visible. The work is not static but a record of movements. On the other hand, my video installations are rather static that has few scenarios or changes.

**Can you please tell us more about the ‘Cyanotype’ photographic technique, and how you used this technique in your impressive ‘Cyano-Collage’ series, which you will be presenting at PHOTOFAIRS | Shanghai 2019. Did you face any challenges working with this medium? Please also inform us on the significance of using this technique to commemorate Taiwanese Artist and Art Critic Mr. Ni Tsai-Chin.**

My process follows the format below:

1. Cover the Xuan paper with the photosensitive solution, continually reshaping and crumpling the paper by hand to create the wrinkled effect during the exposure.
2. Leave the wrinkled paper exposed to sunlight for about thirty minutes to an hour and washing the paper to let the image fixed
3. ‘Read’ the papers to choose what could be used from the collage. Normally I choose only a few papers from dozens. I put one Xuan paper on the canvas, using a brush to flatten it. Next, I apply acrylic gel five or six times to seal the structure of the Collage. Every time a new layer of paper is added. I use blank papers to adjust the composition — to bring out the landscape, to create the depth, and to erase part of the image to leave empty space for imagination.
4. Finally, I apply the UV protective varnish to protect the cyanotype from sunlight.

The whole process is a bit similar to working on ‘layers’ in Photoshop, but no computers nor cameras are involved. The Cyano-Collage Series is based on the combination of what I have previously experimented in the Wrinkled Texture Series, experimental photography, and the aesthetics of traditional eastern painting.

The first challenge I met is that the nature of the Xuan paper is very different from the photographic paper that is normally used for cyanotype photography. I gradually learned, from my experience with Xuan paper, the complexity and variability of the material. The paper western painting adopts, for example the

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watercolor paper, has a coating so that the pigments would remain on the surface no matter how thick they are. However, in the raw Xuan paper (without alum) that is applied in ink painting, the pigments are absorbed. The extent that the ink seeps through the xuan paper can be controlled, creating greater possibilities.

Working closely and consistently with these traditional methods and materials like Xuan paper makes me aware of their limitations in the modern era, but also urges me to think about a way to inherit it by transforming it into contemporary practice. When my works were exhibited in the west, people were very intrigued by Xuan paper and thought that it resembles fabric.

I was deeply influenced by my work as an assistant for professional artist Ni Tsai-Chin, who was an experimental ink painter, conceptual artist, art historian and critic. His value and interpretation of art altered how I used to think about our tradition, and that is the reason why I paid tribute to him in my work.



**Your contemporary artworks often integrate traditional methods (such as Shan Shui to depict natural landscapes) into the process and overall aesthetic. How important do you think it is to maintain these traditional artistic techniques in photography today? Do you often notice other artists combining old methods with new in their artworks?**



© Wu Chi-Tsung, *Wire V*, 2018. Courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery (New York & Taipei)

Many contemporary artists haven't had the training of painting which makes it harder for them to comprehend the history of art from a creator's point of view. Sometimes it worries me that we have abandoned too many valued experiences and methods in traditional art as we transform too resolutely.

People who only work in the contemporary art world would struggle to really understand what contemporary art is, and same for

individuals who only focus on traditional forms. Personally, I appreciate Liu Jianhua and Yu Peng's art, for they break the limitation of the traditions, whilst working closely with them. For me, working in the contemporary art world with traditional methods gifted me the ability to understand what is shared and what is irreplaceable.

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**As well as the 'Cyano-Collage' series, Sean Kelly Gallery has also incorporated the series 'Landscape in the Mist' (2012) into their current group exhibition titled 'Abstract by Nature'. When did you start experimenting with video? Why did you choose to use video for this project?**

I started working with video in 2001 whilst at university. After I was trained in traditional painting for more than ten years before college, I started to explore different mediums from ink painting to video. For about a year I have been taking my video camera everywhere. I film everything to capture contemporary daily experiences. I have been trying to create a dialogue in the language of new media art between video works and the training in painting that I have received. My 'Landscape in the Mist' video originates from the 'Still Life Series', both of which are my earliest attempt to combine my experiences in video and traditional painting. The 'Landscape in the Mist' series was inspired by the impressive landscape paintings of Camille Corot, creating a poetic atmosphere with traditional eastern painting.



© Wu Chi-Tsung, *Still Life Series*. 2018. Courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery (New York & Taipei)

**What are you most looking forward to at PHOTOFAIRS | Shanghai? As an artist that does not work solely in photography, why do you think it is important for your work to be shown at our Fair in September?**

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Usually, I am invited to present my works at an exhibition which is one of three categories: contemporary art (new media art), photography, or traditional ink art. I am very much looking forward to learning how my work will be seen and discussed under the narrative of photography as well as in the context of mainland China.

**Follow our #ArtistTakeover with Wu Chi-Tsung (Sean Kelly Gallery) on our Instagram platform [here](#).**

**Wu Chi-Tsung will be part of the panel discussion on Saturday 21st September, [get more information here](#).**

**To visit PHOTOFAIRS | Shanghai 2019 (20-22nd September, Shanghai Exhibition Center) [click here to buy tickets](#).**