

Biomorphic Materiality: Ceramic Sculpture in the Digital Age

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ZHAO MENG'S PRINTS ARE CHALLENGING in a number of ways (fig. 1). Upon first encounter, the initial barrier between the artworks and viewers is the question of what they are, exactly. The uncertainty concerns their medium status and "objecthood." They look every bit like ink paintings, except they are in fact prints. However, to call them "photographic prints" hardly does justice to them. Mounted as pictorial scrolls on *xuan* papers, they aspire toward the condition of ink paintings, except they are not—there is no taking away from the fact that they are prints. The oscillation between print and painting appears less central once we focus our attention on the subject: rocks. There, again, is the problem. They appear manifestly as so-called scholars' rocks (*guaishi*)—aesthetic objects in traditional Chinese visual culture and conceptual artworks in the contemporary landscape—except, they are not rocks. They are in fact ceramic artworks. One may regard them as ceramic sculptures, except that the very concept of sculpture needs some tweaking so that they can be savored in the ways that Chinese display rocks are appreciated in their full dimensions and flavors. Leaving aside the quibbling about the extent to which Chinese scholars' rocks mesh with the Western notion of sculpture, there is yet another level of complexity to untangle. Much as they are every bit ceramic works emerging from fired clay, the works are not entirely ceramic pieces either. In fact, Zhao Meng produced and photographed a series of ceramic chunks (fig. 2), assembled the photographic imagery through the digital medium, printed them on mixed-fiber paper, and mounted the works as pictorial scrolls (fig. 3). The complexity of the layering is dizzying, to say the least. The seeming straight-forwardness of the physical medium belies a process of constant remediation. Fired clay in its variety of sculptural forms is subjected to the camera's lens. The digital medium coaxes and restores the photographic penumbra into



Figure 1. Zhao Meng, *Rock*, 2019.
Digital print on Xuan paper,
39 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 39 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches (100 × 100 cm).



Figure 2. Zhao Meng.
Propitious Cloud 2, 2018.
Ceramics, Xuan paper, and acrylic,
39 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 39 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches (100 × 100 cm).



optical existence. The grand finality is the reunion of elements. The clay that the artist submits to firing is mixed with straw. Meanwhile, straw is one of the mainstays of the mixed-fiber paper known as Xuan paper. To print the digitally-sutured ceramic forms onto the fibrous medium of Xuan paper is tantamount to the completion of a cycle. The straw mixed into the pre-fired clay finally rejoins its material kinship, as Xuan paper contains, among other things, straw fiber. The cycle is one of straw-to-straw transmigration. Derived from the straw-mixed medium, the work reincarnates different media along the way until it finally arrives on paper—a fibrous medium—as its rediscovered habitat. So what we have here is a staging of media, or rather, remediation. It is not so much that the work exemplifies the oscillation between the quasi sculpture and pseudo painting, or an illusory charade of ceramics masquerading as stone. Rather, what the work stages is the cycle of material transmigration that is the ultimate visual drama.

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Zhao's prints certainly challenge questions of medium. That these prints appear to make ceramic sculpture their central subject and that they are also digitally processed resurrects an old ghost: the oft rehearsed tension between the handicraft and automated technology. One accentuates the materiality of clay; the other pulls the work toward the seeming immateriality of virtuality. This opposition, by extension, also sets in motion the divide between the natural and artificial; the handmade and the mechanical; personal subjectivity and impersonal objectivity; nature and culture.

The centrality of scholars' rocks as the subject of depiction serves as a good object lesson. The Chinese symbolic investment in stones as aesthetic objects has a long history (fig. 4). It is particularly from the

Figure 3. Zhao Meng,
Hand Scroll Work – 2, 2019.
Digital print on Xuan paper,
20 × 94½ inches (51 × 240 cm).



Figure 4. Scholar's rock, ca. eighteenth century. Ying stone, or black limestone with veins of white calcite, $30\frac{1}{4} \times 13\frac{3}{4} \times 8\frac{1}{8}$ inches (76.9 × 35 × 20.5 cm). From Yingde, Guangdong Province. Harvard Art Museums/ Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Marcus, 1981.206.

ninth century onward that scholars' rocks became a sustained and highly codified aesthetic and visual practice in China. One impetus behind the stone-centered aesthetic appreciation and collecting activity is the creation of a distinctive artistic medium. As an aesthetic object, stones are now often classified or tagged as sculpture. But the classification is a forced one. Our understanding of the sculptural medium still largely follows the formulation built on Western classical or Renaissance practice: "Sculpture," following Giorgio Vasari, "is an art which takes away the superfluous from the given material and reduces it to that shape of the body which is designed in the idea of the artist."¹ It is a laborious medium of "making of objects in the round."² The use of tools is central to the practice, which often involves, in the case of Greek sculpture, "hammer, punch, saw, drill; pointed, flat, rounded, and claw chisels; files, rasps, and emery."³ None of these would apply well to the medium of Chinese scholars' rocks. By contrast, Chinese stones as an art medium purports to be a *found* object acquired from nature. Thus, Pi Rixiu speaks of a Taihu rock from the top of Sea-Turtle Mountain:

Scraping the moss-covered cliff from top to bottom.
The rocks must be the crafty tricks of Heaven;
Truly they cannot be the ingenuity of humans.⁴

Much as it may deploy the use of instruments in coaxing the rock mass into a distinct and desired shape through chiseling and other sorts of tool-aided molding, Chinese scholars' rocks are nevertheless premised on the avowed fiction that each is an organic form—in other words, largely untampered with. Emphasis tends to center upon their natural habitat in the natural world—for instance, their underwater origins, in the case of Taihu rocks. Human touch and artisanal treatment are decidedly concealed as much as possible, even though the actual practice may suggest otherwise. Our standard perception of traditional sculpture usually acknowledges the fact of its materiality, while Chinese aesthetic appreciation of scholars' rocks tends to desolidify its materiality or dematerialize its medium. The pleasure in viewing the stones is extracted primarily from the oscillating perceptual act of regarding the object as a wide range of analogous things other than itself, a process of de-ontologization and dematerialization. Thus Pi Rixiu observes:

What do they look like?—
Even a painter with demonic skills could not picture them.
Some curve like reptiles;
Others squat like tigers.
Intertwining like interlocked hooks,
Overlapping like calyx attached to each other.
Some look like the bones of a giant;
Others look like the tallies of the Supreme God.
Swelling, like bamboo shoots of Yundang Mountain,



Figure 5. You Qiu, *A Gathering of Scholars in a Garden*, second half of the sixteenth century. Hanging scroll, 52 × 17½ inches (132.1 × 43.5 cm). Harvard Art Museums, 1999.230.1.

Tingling, like beads of beautiful gem.
Where they break, the mouth of a spring is exposed;
As they are removed, they still carry beards of sand.⁵

3

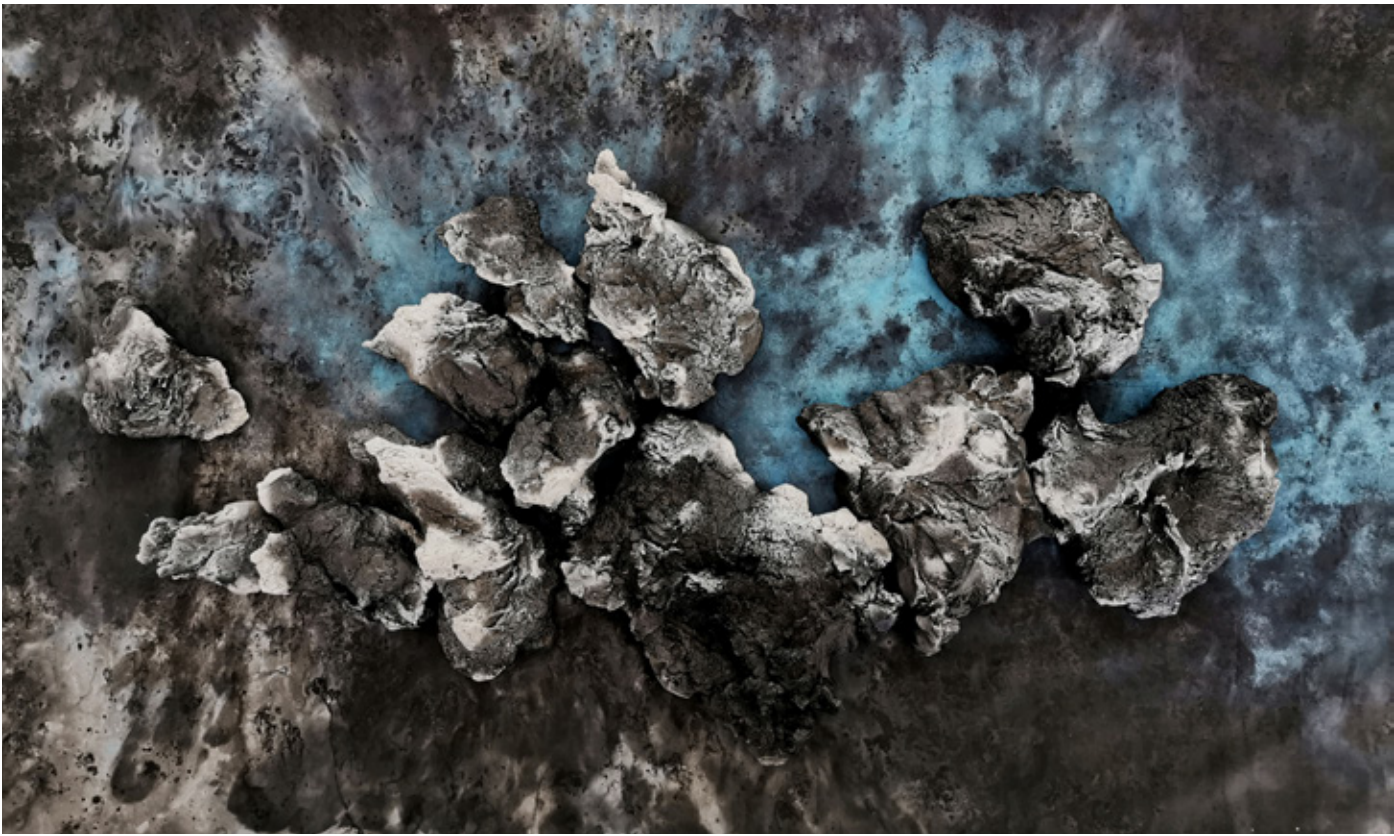
A fiction enables and sustains the ninth-century poet's aesthetic pleasure. The fiction, as mentioned above, is premised on the conviction that scholars' rocks are exclusively a product of nature. The aesthetic pleasure could thus be sustained by distancing one from the purposeful activities of human labor. As such, the appreciation of the stones amounts to a cultural pursuit with strong elitist tendencies. By the eleventh century, a growing unease began to creep into the conscience of the educated elites. They became painfully aware that the *natural* appearance of scholars' rocks belied the labor-intensive operation behind the aesthetic appreciation of such objects. Even if the stones received little tampering since their quarry—which was not often the case—their transportation was costly and definitely involved massive human labor. Sensitive literati began to walk a delicate tightrope. On one hand, they were unsettled by a moral problem: the concern for the toll on the toiling masses at whose cost the stone-as-nature fiction was sustained. On the other, the centuries-old aesthetic practice of enjoying scholars' rocks had congealed into an entrenched cultural practice they hardly had the resolve to suddenly abandon (fig. 5). So the fiction has survived into the present day. The cultural appreciation of scholars' rocks continues to be premised on the false narrative of their naturalness. (The presumed naturalness stems from their rootedness in nature.) The visual pleasure it affords derives from its freedom from the workings of human hand or touch. Artifice thus comes across as labor-free ease; culture disguises itself as nature.

The scholars' rock-shaped metallic sculpture by the contemporary artist Zhan Wang deflates this fiction (fig. 6). His quasi-stone's chrome coating flaunts the artificiality of the object long premised on the conceit of being wholly derived from nature. It thereby exposes or demolishes the traditional veneer by foregrounding its postindustrial materiality while emanating a postmodern cool. That his avidly collected work is commonly installed in international corporate headquarters comes as no surprise. The corporates are attracted to its cosmopolitan cool; the museums to its Chinese identity and contemporaneity; the critics to its suggestive overtones and imagined conceptual charge. Its ultimate statement, a thorough demolition of the culture-nature boundary, has made any further concern with the vexed relationship between natural process and human intervention a moot issue.

Zhao Meng's ceramic stones pick up where Zhan Wang's chrome-coated sculpture leaves off. At the outset, both artists' works appear to share the same conceptual territory. Zhan Wang uses metallurgy to simulate scholars' rocks, while Zhao Meng employs ceramics. And

Figure 6. Zhan Wang, *Sculpture in the Form of a Nine-Hole Scholar's Rock*, 2001. Hammered, assembled, welded, and highly polished stainless steel, 29¼ × 17½ × 7⅞ inches (74.5 × 44.3 × 20 cm). Harvard Art Museum, 2002.270.A-B.





while their respective media are both material mimicries of stone, the nature of ceramics sets them apart. To some extent, Zhao Meng's ceramic works return form to nature. Equal partners with nature, ceramic artists are less presumptuous about their capacity to lord over their medium. Once their pieces enter the kiln, they have done their part; the rest of the process is beyond their control as the firing process will determine the work's final outcome. This fundamental uncertainty—the confrontation with the unknown once the work emerges from the kiln—is what makes ceramic art at once challenging and rewarding.

In so far as firing forms the bulk of the ceramic art, it is easy and habitual to regard clay as the primary material medium of ceramic art. But that is only part of the story. Medium, lest we forget, encompasses an array of senses.⁶ The medium could be material, such as clay, but it could also be a go-between of sorts, an enabler, a catalytic agent, the means by which one state of things transforms into another. Fire, for one, counts as a medium, though it is often underrated and overlooked. Contrary to our sense of medium as palpable material—clay, for example—fire is a subtractive medium. Like the concept of zero, fire dematerializes.⁷ It burns stuff away. In the context of ceramics, it does not demolish clay, but transforms it. When fire does its part, the ceramist has no role to play but wait for the firing to run its course.

This is where and how Zhao works with the fire medium. The project of producing a ceramic sculpture means that sculpting is only of

Figure 7. Zhao Meng,
Propitious Cloud 5, 2018.
Ceramics, color ink,
Xuan paper, and acrylic,
31½ × 59 inches (80 × 150 cm).



Figure 8. Hu Zhengyan, Rock—Illustration from the *Ten Bamboo Studio Manual of Calligraphy and Painting* (*Shizhuzhai shuhua pu*), after 1633–before 1703. Page from a woodblock printed book mounted as an album leaf; ink and color on paper, 9 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 11 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches (25 × 28.7 cm). Harvard Art Museums, 1940.165.90.

secondary importance. The crux is the *ceramic* part, which means firing the clay. But if the work involved no more than firing the clay, then it would have been a rather prosaic undertaking at best. What makes his ceramic stone project special is that the firing consumes more than clay. Zhao understands clearly that firing is central to the operation, and that the medium of ceramic sculpture sets the parameter in which firing plays the key role. That he couldn't change. What he could modify is the stuff being fired. Clay is still a constant. The scholars' stone, as a form, is also a fixture. Its plastic variety belies its uniform essence—one way or another, it delivers some kind of fantastic form. What makes ceramic sculpture different from a cold-medium sculpture, such as stone, is the transformative process by which the base stuff—the clay—turns into something else (fig. 7).

With its millennium-long tradition, the fantastic shape of scholars' stones could no longer be innovated. Traditional practice has pushed all the boundaries imaginable with regard to the extremity of odd shapes (fig. 8). What *can* be altered now is the texture of the stones. While Zhan Wang had the surface coated in chrome, Zhao Meng plays to his strength as a ceramicist. While fire and clay remain the mainstay, Zhao Meng's visionary contribution comes from what can be added and mixed to yield different textures after the firing. Zhao adds two material ingredients into the mix: straw and Xuan paper. Each of them performs, endures, and survives firing differently. Kneading straw and

paper into the clay, the artist anticipates that the lump to emerge from firing will assume a dramatic appearance beyond recognition. Straw and paper, of course, turn into ashes of different complexions. They achieve a level of solidarity with the clay—itself also transformed through firing—by way of optics.

4

Ceramic sculpture has a long history in China, which can be traced back thousands of years (fig. 9). The art form had its various moments of glory in the past. One can note, in the case of a second or first century BCE sculpture, the brilliance with which figures are molded to keep the lithe form in balance and in good grace. Whims are indulged as the human face morphs into a human-bird hybrid through molding (fig. 10). To the extent that it is an earthenware, *ceramic* sculpture, care is taken to keep the circular form of the drum intact during the firing. One can



Figure 9. Elongated Tripod Ewer with Short Spout and Long Strap Handle, the Handle Braced with Struts, ca. 1900–1500 BCE. Earthenware, $21\frac{1}{8} \times 6\frac{3}{4} \times 5\frac{3}{4}$ inches (53.5 × 17 × 14.6 cm). Harvard Art Museums/ Arthur M. Sackler Museum, gift of Anthony M. Solomon, 2006.170.119.

Figure 10. Kneeling Figure Beating a Circular Drum on a Stand in the Form of a Kneeling Human with a Bird's Beak, second-first century BCE. Molded medium gray earthenware with cold-painted pigments over white ground, 17 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches (43.5 cm). Harvard Art Museums/ Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Gift of Anthony M. Solomon, 2003.171.



also note the celadon-glazed, lion-shaped holder that results from incision, combing, gouging while allowing for applique (fig. 11).

The long history is also a burden. Writing in 1990 at the inception of the modernist experimental ceramics in China, Li Yanzu aligns the newly conceived medium with Neolithic pottery, dating back to 8,000 years ago from the Yellow River valley, the cradle of Chinese civilization.⁸ It is against this colossal backdrop that Li speaks of *contemporary* Chinese ceramic art. The alignment can be misleading. The long line of continuity does not mean that the hefty and venerable historical legacy necessarily translates into continued inventiveness. In fact, it often generates complacency and stagnation.

The beginning of the story of contemporary Chinese ceramic sculpture comes down to two historical moments of total embarrassment. In 1981, the National History Museum in Taipei mounted an exhibition featuring modern ceramic works by Japanese and Chinese artists. As modern ceramic art in mainland China was just beginning, the Chinese artists featured were mainly based in Taiwan, where modernist ceramic practice had been gaining some traction since the 1960s. Still, the contrast between the modernist ceramic works by the Japanese and Chinese artists was striking. The Chinese works paled considerably against their Japanese counterparts. The strong public reaction put considerable stress on the Taiwanese art world. The old axiom “China, thy name is china” had long been taken for granted. The 1981 exhibition burst that bubble of self-delusion. The Taiwanese ceramic artists took the humiliation in good stride, and turned the embarrassment into deep soul searching. The incident galvanized more earnest experimentation in modernist ceramic practice.

Seven years later, it was mainland China’s turn to experience the second historical moment of embarrassment. In 1988, China entered the International Ceramics Festival in Mino, Japan. Launched in 1986, the festival intended to raise design consciousness and promote innovative techniques of ceramic production. However, with little understanding of the prevailing international standard and the current state of the field, the Chinese entries were exclusively traditional vessel types (*ping*, *zun*, *guan*, *hu*) with refined surface decoration. None of them made the cut. The jury politely praised the techniques and cultural distinction of the Chinese wares, but did not mince words in signaling that these entries were conspicuously out of touch with the times. The jury therefore urged more international exchanges between China and the rest of the world. Faced with the verdict and shocked by how the world had forged ahead in the realm where China was supposed to reign supreme, the Chinese delegates went away despondent. Back at home, critics compared the incident to the debacle of China’s first participation in the Olympics, where the country was represented by only one athlete who failed to win anything.⁹ Overseas Chinese critics diagnosed the root of the problem: the stagnation had to do with a disconnect with technological advances and new conceptual



Figure 11. Vessel or Holder in the Form of a Lion, fourth century. Celadon Yue ware, $4\frac{1}{8} \times 7\frac{1}{4} \times 3\frac{1}{4}$ inches (12.5 × 18.4 × 8.3 cm). Harvard Art Museums, 1994.13.

apparatuses.¹⁰ The late 1980s may be considered the beginning of contemporary Chinese ceramic art.

Events such as the Mino International Ceramics Festival were merely one of the catalytic agents jump-starting the modernist ceramic movement in mainland China. In fact, a convergence of forces contributed to the movement's jump start. Experimental ceramic art in China is part of the global story of circulation and transmission, in which China figures more as a source of inspiration than a crucible of practice.

Modern experimental ceramic art—or studio pottery—started as a discursive construct in England. Writers such as Clive Bell, Herbert Read, and Roger Fry envisioned pottery as a charged object and medium.¹¹ It was a convenient peg on which they could hang their aspirations for aesthetic subjectivism in reaction against the deindividualizing force of industrialization. Chinese pottery anchored the surging aesthetic Orientalism:

There are signs that the present rapidly increasing preoccupation with oriental art will be more intense, and produce a profounder impression on our views, than any previous phase of Orientalism. For one thing, we are more disillusioned, more tired with our own traditions, which seems to have landed us at length in a too frequent representation of the obvious or the sensational. To us the art of the East presents the hope of discovering a more spiritual, more expressive idea of design.¹²

Bernard Leach, a Hong Kong-born Englishman who spent quite some years in his early life in East Asia, envisioned an ideal, gentleman potter-artist who synthesized both the design and production in one unifying aestheticizing self. Accordingly, the pottery of the Tang and Song periods in China, among other things, “was the unified human expression.... The Chinese potters’ use of natural colours and textures in clays, the quality of their glazes ... the beauty and vitality of their well-balanced and proportioned forms, could be a constant source of inspiration to the designer for mass-production no less than to the craftsman.”¹³

It was not until the postwar period in Japan and the United States, however, that the idea of an expressive individualism against mass-produced utilitarianism was fully delivered. Leading the charge was Peter Voulkos, who took cues from abstract expressionism to liberate pottery making from its traditional shackles. He and the Otis group disregarded the traditional potter’s weariness toward cracks and fissures. Imperfection and accidents were embraced. Inert slabs could be joined together by violence. Piled up clay knew no boundaries. The subdued colors expected of traditional pottery were jettisoned in favor of a vivid Technicolor palette of epoxy and acrylic paints.¹⁴ Moreover, the vessel-centered pottery gave rise to the amorphism of ceramic sculpture or sculptural ceramics.

The tidings of the modernist, experimental ceramics exemplified by Voulkos and the Otis group crossed the Pacific and reached the Chinese shore in the 1980s. Li Maozong, a Taiwan-born Chinese American ceramic artist, was the messenger. Between 1985 and 1991, Li visited China a dozen times. He gave lectures on the history of American experimental ceramics,¹⁵ and demonstrated these new ideas through his own works of ceramic sculptures, including *Dream of Mountain Rocks*.¹⁶ The message conveyed therein was that ceramic art is abstract in disposition. Thriving on the effect of chance, it is a conglomerate medium of clay, fire, shapes, and glazes. Unbound from the normal procedures of traditional ceramic production, it strived toward a more expressive and freer horizon. Unburdened by utilitarian functionalism, it aspired toward a pure ceramic art form imbued with vitality and a personal sensibility.¹⁷

Li’s lectures and works both kindled widespread excitement and were met with some resistance from the more recalcitrant camps. Die-hard traditionalists balked at the individual expressionism advocated by Li. They insisted on setting the boundary of what should and should not be done.¹⁸ It is easy to see why Li’s introduction of American experimental studio ceramics would rattle some in China. The long-held assumptions about the ceramic medium (i.e., its vessel-centric utilitarianism and craft-bound artisanal conventions) faced a serious challenge, probably for the first time after centuries of entrenched conventions. Nevertheless, during the exuberant 1980s in China, when young generations were hankering for alternative modes of artistic practice after decades of isolation, Li’s advocacy was tantamount to lighting a torch against the long dark night.¹⁹

5

What is presented above lends the impression of a linear genealogy for Chinese experimental ceramics. It begins with Bernard Leach in the East and ends where he started. Li Maozong comes across as a Prometheus who stole the fire from the American Otis group and passed the torch to China. Many current narratives prevailing in Chinese ceramic discourse collaborate with this timeline.

However, this linear narrative can be misleading. It gives short shrift to one remarkable moment in the history of Chinese experimental ceramics. On February 5, 1989, a momentous art exhibition, known as the *China/Avant-Garde Exhibition*, was held in Beijing. Unfortunately, an unexpected performance—a woman artist shooting at the installation of a telephone booth—caused the show to prematurely shut down. Nonetheless, the exhibition is now remembered as the culmination of the experimental art of the long 1980s, the post-Mao reform era of openness and experimentalism. Only two artists specializing in ceramic art were included in the show. Sun Ren was one of them.

The 1980s were heady days in China. The relative openness led to an explosion of creative energy and intellectual fermentation. Sun Ren exemplified the exuberance and imaginary verve of the time. A polymath ranging across a variety of artistic mediums, he excelled in oil, ink, and ceramics. He was among the pioneering abstract expressionists in post-Mao China. Moreover, he also wrote, directed, and performed in *Hamlet in Heaven* (1985), a stage play that was a huge success. Cast in the mode of absurdist theater, the plot turns the postmortem Ophelia into a dog that unites with Hamlet at the play's end. The intention was to challenge anthropocentrism in favor of a panvitalism that entertained the possibility of “canine-centrism” or “canidism.”

Sun Ren's reconceptualization—his downplay of anthropomorphism and mock-serious exaltation of canidism—extended to inorganic materials as well. This is evidenced in his ceramic installation showcased in the aforementioned 1989 exhibition. The installation features a freestanding ceramic cone, vaguely phallic in overtone. Offsetting the ceramic cone is a backdrop of photographic prints featuring a variety of ceramic cones (fig. 12), each representing different organic states, such as cortex anatomy, honeycomb, and so forth.²⁰ The intended conceit plays on the ontological ambiguity of these objects. They oscillate between inorganic ceramic materiality and organic vitality.

The conceptual framework undergirding Sun's 1980s ceramic works is based upon his voracious reading and internalization of a staggering range of intellectual and artistic resources.²¹ Intellectually, he drew on Wilhelm Ostwald's Energism; artistically, he gravitated toward the ceramic cosmos of the American ceramicist Brad Miller. It makes sense that Sun, as a ceramicist, was fascinated by Ostwald, the renowned chemist-cum-philosopher and the 1909 Nobel Prize winner in chemistry. The *culture fever* of 1980s China further drew him closer to culturology, a science of civilization advocated by Ostwald. For



Ostwald, physical sciences, social sciences, and cultural study should all be aligned along the same wavelength. Energy, not matter, is the stuff that makes the universe: “matter is only a convenient term which we use to imbue changing events with permanence.”²² In this view, atoms are no more than mathematical fictions. Energy alone is the “reiner Stoff” (i.e., pure material), and it is the operation of energy that accounts for “a universe in a state of flux.”²³ For a Chinese artist coming of age in the 1980s, it all made sense. The air was filled with talk of physics, metaphysics, and cosmology, in part fueled by the publication of Fritjof Capra’s *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism* in 1975.²⁴ The boundary between physical science and metaphysics became blurred. It is easy to see how Ostwald’s Energism spoke to a Chinese artist newly inspired by the alignment of modern physics and the ancient Chinese *Book of Changes*. *Qi*, or energy, reigned and explained the world in flux. It had additional appeal to the ceramicist working with malleable and pliant forms.

It is also easy to see why and how Ostwald’s Energism and Brad Miller’s ceramic vitalism were so conveniently aligned on Sun Ren’s horizon. Miller’s ceramic sculptures (fig. 13) embody a pantheistic conviction about a mystic life force permeating all things.²⁵ Coaxing organic life out of clay, Miller’s ceramic sculptures often stage the primordial drama of birth, union, and death. Cell forms are shown on the verge of splitting into two entities.²⁶ Biomorphism likewise fuels Sun’s own ceramic works that come alive with cortex, skin, and honeycombs.

Figure 12. Sun Ren, *Ceramic under the Skin*, 1989. Earthenware, 20 × 6¾ × 5½ inches (51 × 17 × 14 cm). Photo courtesy the artist.

Figure 13. Brad Miller, *History Series #1*, 1987. Stoneware, 5½ × 7¾ × 4¾ inches (13.25 × 18.75 × 11 cm).



The year 1989 might be considered the beginning of modernist experimental ceramics in mainland China. Sun Ren's lengthy essay, "Conjecture Concerning the Question of the Modernist Ceramic Culture,"²⁷ certainly approaches the status of a manifesto inaugurating a new art movement. That the essay is presented as a conjecture means that Sun was envisioning a new medium (i.e., modernist ceramics) more as a theoretical construct at a time when he was one of the few who had just begun to practice what they preached. It is remarkable that Sun's manifesto-like essay sets out to define the parameters of the modernist ceramics with such depth and magnitude that its relevance has not dimmed to this day.

Among Sun's students was Zhao Meng. The ceramic vitalism Sun had envisioned now takes on a different life and trajectory in the hands of Zhao.

6

Zhao Meng is a native of Anhui. The region is steeped in a tradition that prizes the cultural artifacts that furnish the study of traditional educated elites, such as the so-called Four Treasures of the Scholars' Studio: brush, ink, paper, and inkstone. It is not clear if he was consciously drawing on the cultural resources of his native region or that these simply came to him more as second nature. In any case, it is clear that a synergy, whether serendipitous or by intention, exists between papermaking and Zhao's ceramic sculpture. Working with pulp is their underlying common denominator, and biomorphism remains the engine behind it.

Papermaking is a biomorphic process. Its quintessential ingredients are plants, which are the fiber integral to papermaking. Traditional literature of the craft speaks of five groups of plants used for papermaking: hemp, bark, rattan, bamboo, and grass. A more cogent scheme may simplify the fivefold taxonomy into two basic sets: bast and grass fibers. Bast fibers include hemp, mulberry, rattan, and blue sandalwood; grass fibers consist of bamboo and rice, or wheat straw. The so-called Xuan paper consists of blue sandalwood and rice straw.²⁸ A key process is to turn the plants into a pulp so that the hard material becomes pliant enough to be cast onto paper molds and brushed onto a wall to dry and become paper. To obtain the pulp, the plants are fermented, cooked (steamed and boiled), rinsed, bleached, beaten, cut, and so on, with the bark removed along the way. Afterward, the pulp can then enter the next stages of sheet formation, pressing, and drying.²⁹

The papermaking process is in fact part of the mental model driving Zhao's ceramic-sculptural project. Much as clay may eventually loom large as the overwhelming bulk of his ceramic stones, it is the papermaking pulp that distinguishes him from the stone mongers and artificers of all conceivable stripes. His ingredients come down to, among other things, rice straws and paper pulps (fig. 14). Their affinity and playful conceptual overtone are to be noted. Straw is the pulp to be;

Figure 14. Zhao Meng. Rice straw, whipped Xuan paper pulp, recycled Xuan paper pulp, and clay mixed with minced rice hulk, 2019. Photograph by Zhao Meng. Courtesy the artist.





and pulp is erstwhile straw. Another layer of conceptual play recedes from the final product: the pulp is actually made of recycled Xuan paper.

Clay is here reconceptualized as part of pulp making. Minced rice hulks, Xuan paper pulp, and sawdust are mixed into wet clay (fig. 15). The pulp-turned-clay chunks are then fired. The temperature of firing varies from 700 to 1,200 degrees. Each firing temperature yields ceramic chunks of different colors and textures. Zhao could have piled these chunks atop one another to form scholars' rocks. Instead, he photographs and digitally assembles the ceramic chunks, and prints the results on Xuan paper. Lest we forget, Xuan paper consists of blue sandalwood and rice straw. It is hard not to think of Zhao's production process as completing a full cycle, which starts and ends with rice straw. It turns out that rice straw is the real hero of this medium-driven drama. Fire plays its part as a subtractive and destructive agent that demolishes plants and reduces them to ashes to be mixed and buried in clay. It is fitting that the material reunion is the grand finality of the play.

The return is of course a symbolic act. Death cannot be reversed. Resurrection and revivification remain a consoling fiction. It is fitting that Zhao's scholars' rocks remain ashen and somber in tonality, fitting for the doleful mood of ruination that accompanies the aftermath of destruction. It is just as apt that, much as his project begins as a tactile undertaking, a sculptural operation, it should end as purely an optical illusion. The stone imagery is disgorged from the printer and laid out on the sheet of mixed-fiber paper. The strong tactility of scholars' rocks, with their convincing spatial illusionism and palpable presence, only reinforces the poignancy of their virtuality. The stones do not exist except as digital objects, ghostly prints on paper. The digital medium here is not the substitution of the real. It makes the fiction of the non-existent object real to the eye; meanwhile, it quietly prepares one for the hard landing: the truth will soon be revealed.

7

Artists are not always aware of the historic role they have fulfilled in the large scheme of things. Zhao, a native of Anhui, is oblivious to the historical drama his Anhui natives staged a century ago, to which he has just added a new act.

If Zhao's project centers on paper and scholars' rocks, a scholar named Hu Yunyu, also an Anhui native, shared the same interest a century ago. A columnist active in the early decades of the twentieth century, Hu was a prominent figure in Chinese art. He was instrumental in the compilation and publication of the groundbreaking Fine Arts Series (*Meishu congshu*), which first appeared in 1911.³⁰ The launching of the series and the overthrow of the last imperial dynasty is by no means a coincidence. Just as the 1911 revolution ushered in a new era in the political landscape, so the book series attempted to introduce the Chinese public to a new definition of art. Traditional Chinese understanding of the arts had hitherto meant the set of Six Arts (rites, music,

Figure 15. Zhao Meng, Different states of Xuan paper pulp, minced rice hulk, and clay mixed with minced rice hulk, 2019. Photograph by Zhao Meng, 2019. Courtesy the artist.

archery, charioteering, calligraphy, and mathematics). The Western concept of fine arts, originating in the French beaux arts, comprised painting, sculpture, and architecture. The tradition harks back to the time of Giorgio Vasari, whose *Lives of the Artists* included painters, sculptors, and architects. The Western scheme has no exact Chinese equivalent. An aesthetic pursuit centered on calligraphy and painting in China would roughly approximate Western fine arts, but the approximation would decidedly leave out sculpture and architecture. Taking its cue from the Western notion of art, the Fine Arts Series launched by Hu Yunyu and Deng Shi attempted to reconceptualize art. It adopted the concept of fine arts (*meishu*), borrowed from the Japanese *bijutsu*. The embrace of sculpture was slow in coming.³¹ Admitting architecture was still inconceivable.

However, Hu's notion of art did signal a reorientation. Cued perhaps by the broader range of fine arts, he began to take notice of material media such as stone and paper. In 1919, he published essays respectively on these two subjects.³² The motivation behind his attraction to these media is not entirely clear. It could have been a response to the alien notion of fine arts, drawing inspiration from it or countering it with indigenous Chinese resources and habits. Either way, his twin interests testify to a growing impulse in art circles in exploiting material media as avenues in art making.

In the meantime, Hu remained intensely interested in the art of painting. While he was expounding on the subjects of stone and paper medium, he frequently interacted with his painter friend Huang Binhong, who pointed him to a potential new direction in Chinese landscape painting. Huang's contention with the circle of mainstream traditional Chinese ink painters of his time concerned the use of ink. The prevailing palate then favored landscapes of uniformly pale tones as a staple of elegant taste, which resulted in an anemic appearance. By contrast, in a letter to Hu, Huang advocated for a landscape of overwhelming dark and somber tones, with robust and brooding overtones (fig. 16).³³ It is apparent that he correlated landscapes to cultural constitution and national psyche. To Huang, a widespread spiritual malaise or amnesia had plagued and seized the national body. He and his like-minded circle therefore sought to remedy it: "The study of painting aims at saving the nation; the recipe shall accordingly cure myriad diseases."³⁴ What he envisioned was not just a stylistic overhaul of ink painting; rather, on the basis of both his theory and practice, it is apparent that he was striving after a revamped ink medium. The new landscape he imagined was not so much painted as it ought to be *built* by piling up layers of ink (fig. 17).

None of this was of any concern to Zhao Meng when he set out to make his prints. It is purely a coincidence that all these—Hu's symbolic investment in stone and paper and Huang's advocacy for somber-toned landscape—happen to converge on his scholars' rocks: ashen, somber, substantial, and weighty. It is perhaps just as coincidental that they all have shared cultural roots in the Anhui region. Regionalism matters

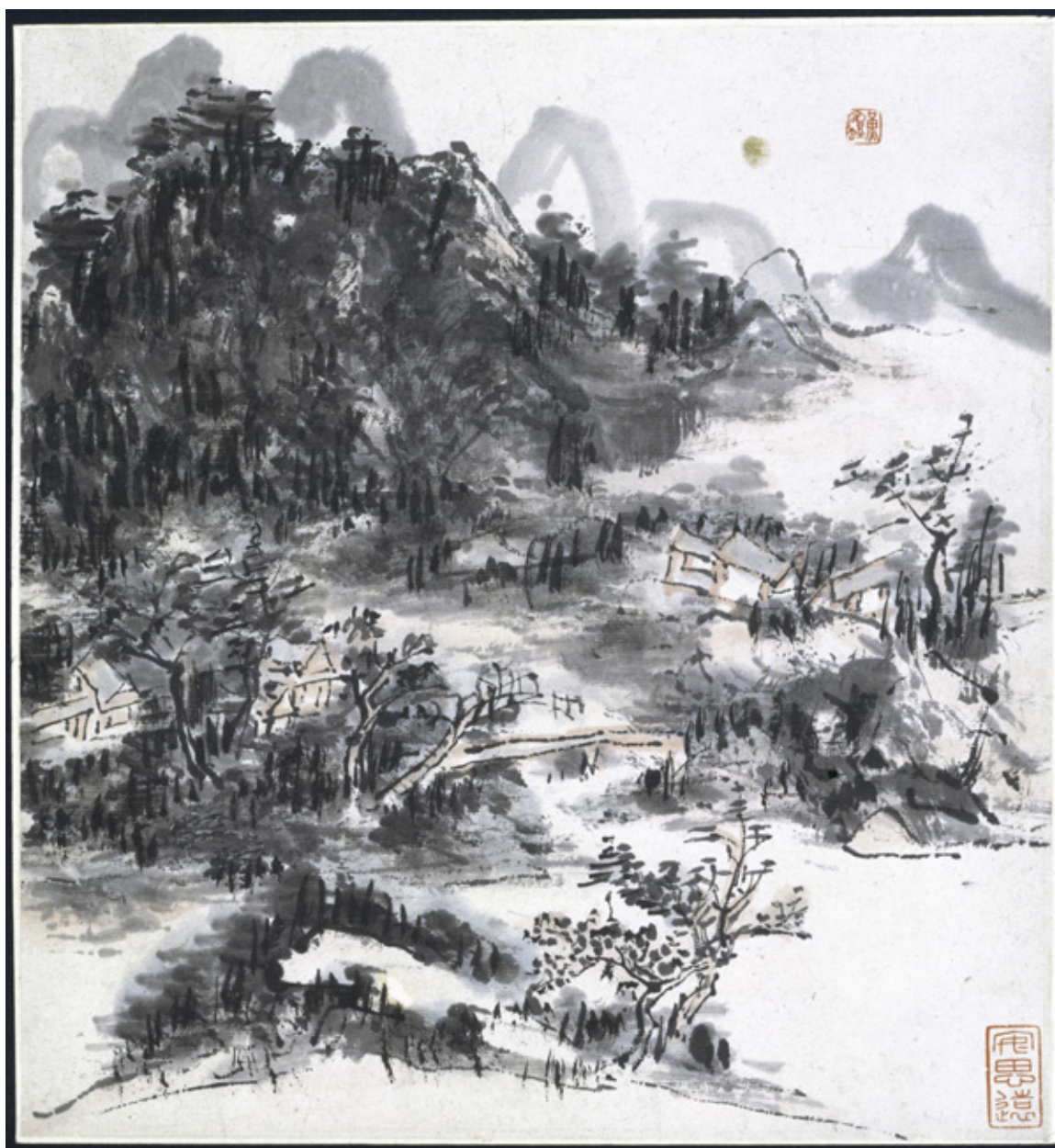


Figure 16. Huang Binhong,
Landscape in the Style of Dong Qichang,
late 1940s. Album leaf mounted as
a hanging scroll; ink and color on paper,
54½ × 16½ inches (138.4 × 41.9 cm).
Metropolitan Museum of Art,
gift of Robert Hatfield Ellsworth,
in memory of La Ferne Hatfield Ellsworth,
1988, 1988.324.4.

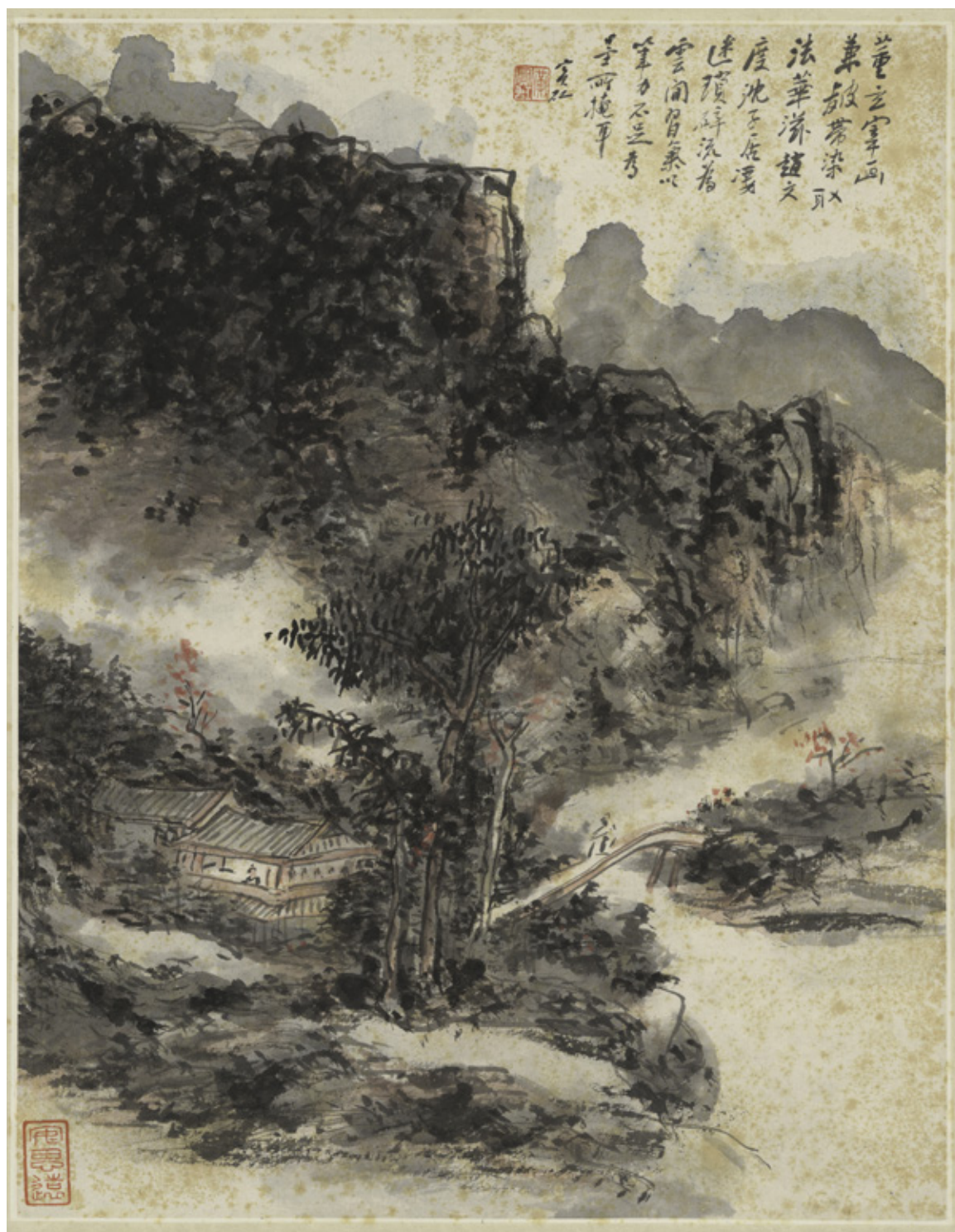


Figure 17. Huang Binhong,
Landscape, n.d. Framed album leaf;
ink and color on paper,
10¼ × 9½ inches (26 × 24.1 cm).
Metropolitan Museum of Art,
bequest of Robert H. Ellsworth, 2014,
2019.290.2.

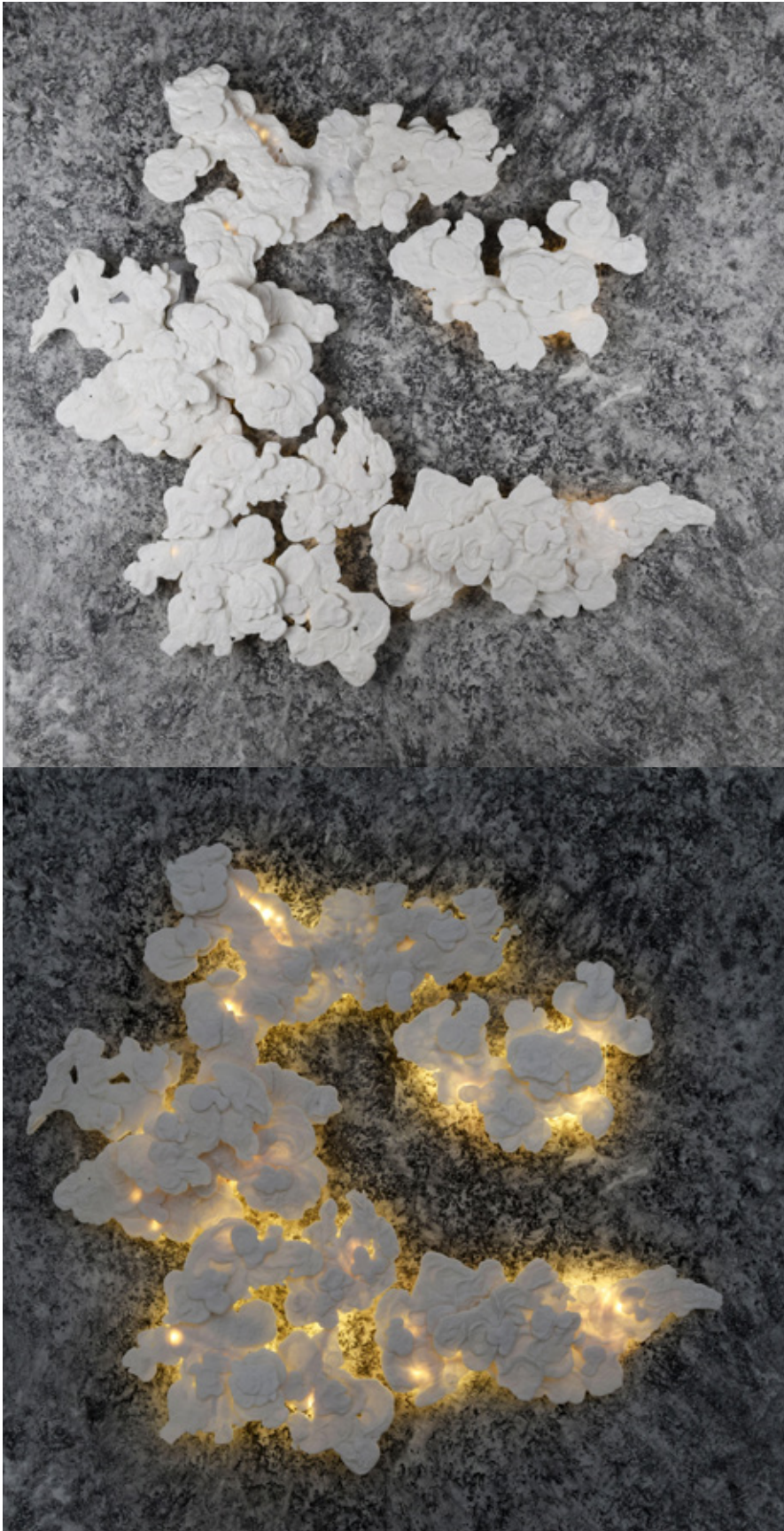


Figure 18. Zhao Meng, *Propitious Cloud 3*, 2018. Ceramics, Xuan paper, and acrylic, 39 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 39 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches (100 × 100 cm). Courtesy Soka Art Beijing.

less here. Zhao's unwitting recapitulation of the set of visual interests of his fellow Anhui natives a century ago accentuates a comparable dynamic at play in vastly different times. Straddling the threshold of historical transition from imperial China to modern state, Hu and Huang took it upon themselves to reconceptualize art by way of material medium. Stone, paper, and somber ink tones were all pressed in service. Likewise, a hundred years later, Zhao felt the heat of a different kind. Dematerialization—induced in part by the digital medium—and the clamor to rematerialize in the wake of conceptual art created a milieu in which nothing would remain the same. Like Hu and Huang a century before him, Zhao drew on the cultural resources dear to him—scholars' rocks, paper, and ink—to reconceptualize art mediums. What the reconfiguration yields is not exactly ceramic, as it exists in print; nor exactly sculpture, nor painting. To call them prints is accurate enough, but this misses the point. In the age of the digital, what matters more is process rather than product. At the heart of the process is the burning of straw and paper pulp, whose ashes survive on the more durable body of clay. Even the clay, however, is to be desolidified or dematerialized into ink prints on the mixed-fiber paper, thereby giving the erstwhile plants a new lease on life. At least the straws are reincarnated in a fibrous ecology. Only the somber tonality of the ink remains consistently subdued. It testifies to the long period of incineration (fig. 18) and the fictiveness or virtuality of ecological cycling and recycling—the rice straw's odyssey—that did not take place. But that cycle is there for us to realize, reckon with, and hope for, even if it is merely an illusion.

- 1 ("La scultura è una arte che levando il superfluo dalla materia suggetta, la riduce a quella forma di corpo che nella idea dello artefice & disegnata.") Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori: Nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. R. Bettarini (Firenze, Italy: Sansoni, 1966–1987), 82.
- 2 Germain Bazin, *The History of World Sculpture* (London: Studio Vista, 1968), 6.
- 3 Sheila Adam, *The Technique of Greek Sculpture in the Archaic and Classical Periods* (London: Thames and Hudson 1966), 2.
- 4 Pi Rixiu, "The Lake Tai Rocks: A Product from the Top of Sea-Turtle Mountain," in *Metamorphosis of the Private Sphere: Gardens and Objects in Tang-Song Poetry*, Xiaoshan Yang (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Asia Center Publications, 2003), 116.
- 5 Ibid., 116–117.
- 6 Malcolm McCullough, *Abstracting Craft: The Practiced Digital Hand* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 193.
- 7 John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 115–164.
- 8 Li Yanzu, "Xiandai yishu de jiaozhi—taoyi suixianglu," *Wenyi yanjiu*, no. 3 (1990): 118.
- 9 Zhu Legeng, "Zhongguo taoyi de fazhan yu faduan," *Dameishu* 6 (2007): 14.
- 10 Wen Lou's remark, cited in Xie Zhi, "Lun xiandai Zhongguo taoyi chuanguo zhong de guannian" (master's thesis, Research Academy of Chinese Arts, 2009), 7.
- 11 Julian Stair, "From Precepts to Praxis: The Origins of British Studio Pottery," in *Things of Beauty Growing: British Studio Pottery*, ed. Glenn Adamson, Martina Droth, and Simon Olding (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 30–31.
- 12 Roger Fry, "Oriental Art," *Burlington Magazine* 17, no. 85 (1910): 3.
- 13 Bernard Leach, "Towards Standard," in *That Continuous Thing: Artists and the Ceramics Studio, 1920–Today*, ed. Sara Matson and Sam Thorne (New York: Abrams, 2016), 15–17.
- 14 Glenn Adamson, "Peter Voulkos and Ken Price," in *That Continuous Thing: Artists and the Ceramics Studio, 1920–Today*, ed. Sara Matson and Sam Thorne, (New York: Abrams, 2016), 74–76.
- 15 The American modernist ceramicists Li introduced to China included Peter Voulkos, Robert Arneson, and Marilyn Levine, among others. See Li Maozong, "Zhongguo xiandai taoyi guoji zhanwang ji Zhongguo taoyi chuantong yu chuanguo xin," *Taoci kexue yu yishu*, no. 12 (2016): 5.
- 16 Li Maozong's *Dream of Mountain Rocks* is now in the collection of the Art Museum of the Northern Industrial University.
- 17 Notes from Li Zongmao's lecture delivered at the Seminar on Product Design of Modernist Pottery and the Art of Ceramics, sponsored by the Ministry of Light Industry of China. Cited in Xie Zhi, "Lun xiandai Zhongguo taoyi chuanguo zhong de guannian," 9.
- 18 Li Maozong, "Zhongguo xiandai taoyi guoji zhanwang ji Zhongguo taoyi chuantong yu chuanguo xin," 8.
- 19 Xie Zhi, "Lun xiandai Zhongguo taoyi chuanguo zhong de guannian," 3.
- 20 They are in fact titled as such. See reproductions of Sun Ren's works in *Xinmeishu*, no. 2 (1989).
- 21 Sun Ren, "Xiandai taoyi wenhua wenti caixiang," *Xinmeishu*, no. 2 (1989): 6–13.
- 22 Wilhelm Ostwald, *Die energie und ihre Wandlungen. Antrittsvorlesung Gehalten am 23. November 1887 in der aula der Universität Leipzig* (Leipzig: W. Englemann, 1888), 26; translation from Niles R. Holt, "A Note on Wilhelm Ostwald's Energism," *Isis* 61, no. 3 (1970): 386.
- 23 Holt, "A Note on Wilhelm Ostwald's Energism," 387.
- 24 Capra's book was translated as *Xiandai wulixue yu dongfang shenmi zhuyi* (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1984).
- 25 Diane Douglas, "When Stones Could Speak," *American Ceramics* 6, no. 2 (1987): 40.
- 26 Mary K. Cloonan, "Rhythm and Breath: Revealing the Invisible, Ceramics by Chris Gustin, Brad Miller, Jill Oberman & Leigh Taylor Mickelson," *Ceramics: Art and Perception*, no. 62 (2005): 70.
- 27 Sun Ren, "Xiandai taoci wenhua wenti chuaixiang," *Xinmeishu*, no. 2 (1989): 6–13.
- 28 Hilary Mullock, "The Xuan Paper," *Paper Conservator* 19, no. 1 (1995): 23–30, doi:10.1080/03094227.1995.9638410. Distinction is made between genuine Xuan paper containing sandalwood and rice straw and imitation Xuan paper consisting of bast fibers and grass fibers. Fei Wen Tsai and Dianne van der Reyden, "Analysis of Modern Chinese Paper and Treatment of a Chinese Woodblock Print," *Paper Conservator* 21, no. 1 (1997): 51, doi: 10.1080/03094227.1997.9638598.
- 29 Fei Wen Tsai and Dianne van der Reyden, "Analysis of Modern Chinese Paper and Treatment of a Chinese Woodblock Print," 49–50.
- 30 Even though Deng Shi and Huang Binhong are commonly credited as among the founders of the series, it is clear from the period literature that Hu provided more of the intellectual input while Deng was more of an organizer and publicist. Huang joined the effort slightly later and played more of the role of a celebrity. For Hu's role, see Zheng Yimei, *Renwu he ji cang* (Harbin: Helongjiang renmin chubanshe, 1989): 264–265. For Deng Shi's primary role in the formation of the Fine Arts Series, see Ogawa Hiromitsu, "Bijutsu sōsho no kankō ni tsuite," *Bijutsushi ronsō* 20 (2004): 33–54. Hong Zaixin regrets Ogawa's omission of Hu Yunyu's key role. See Hong Zaixin, "Xiandai wenhua xianxingzhe de baofu yu shijian," *Yishushi yanjiu* 15 (2013): 327–373, esp. 354n41.
- 31 It was not until the sixth set of the series that sculpture was included.
- 32 Hu Yunyu, "Shuo zhi," *Xiaoshuo yuebao* 10, no. 1 (1919): 117–120. Hu Yunyu, "Qishi zhi," *Xiaoshuo yuebao* 10, no. 7 (1919): 125–128. The sequels to both essays appear in subsequent issues.
- 33 Hong Zaixin, "Xiandai wenhua xianxingzhe de baofu yu shijian," 339–340, esp. 370n137.
- 34 Huang Binhong, "Huaxue pian," cited in Wang Luxiang, *Huang Binhong* (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2000), 93.