

Decentring the Human Perspective through Abstraction: Two Examples from Contemporary Photography in China

Roberto Figliulo

Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona

E-mail: roberto.figliulo@uab.cat

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6933-9024>

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/aris.106512>

Recibido: 15 de diciembre de 20265/ Aceptado: 8 de julio de 2026 / Publicación en línea: 13 de julio de 2026

Abstract: Focusing on the works of Jiang Pengyi and Chen Xiaoyi, the study investigates how experimental photographic practices challenge the anthropocentric foundations of traditional photographic representation. Jiang's experimental projects, based on cameraless photography and material encounters with light, insects, and chemical processes, foreground the agency of non-human forces in the production of images. Chen's work, shaped by Chinese aesthetics and philosophy, develops a visual language that resists objectification and emphasises continuity between human and natural forms. Situating these practices within the history of abstract photography and within contemporary debates on experimental image-making in relation to the ecological crisis, the article argues that both artists articulate a form of abstraction that is neither purely formal nor detached from reality. Instead, their works operate as visual investigations of matter, perception, and environmental change, suggesting new ways of understanding photography's role in times of planetary instability.

Keywords: Abstract photography, post-human, agential realism, ecological crisis, cosmotronics.

[Esp.] Descentrando la perspectiva humana mediante la abstracción: dos ejemplos de la fotografía contemporánea en China

Resumen: Centrado en las obras de Jiang Pengyi y Chen Xiaoyi, el estudio investiga cómo las prácticas fotográficas experimentales cuestionan los fundamentos antropocéntricos de la representación fotográfica tradicional. Los proyectos experimentales de Jiang, basados en la fotografía sin cámara y en encuentros materiales con la luz, los insectos y los procesos químicos, ponen en primer plano la agencia de fuerzas no humanas en la producción de imágenes. La obra de Chen, moldeada por la estética y la filosofía chinas, construye un lenguaje visual que evita la objetivación y enfatiza la continuidad entre las formas humanas y naturales. Al situar estas prácticas tanto en la historia de la fotografía abstracta como en los debates contemporáneos sobre la creación experimental de imágenes en relación con la crisis ecológica, el artículo sostiene que ambos artistas articulan una forma de abstracción que no es ni puramente formal ni desligada de la realidad. Por el contrario, sus obras funcionan como investigaciones visuales sobre la materia, la percepción y el cambio ambiental, y ofrecen nuevas maneras de pensar el papel de la fotografía en tiempos de inestabilidad planetaria.

Palabras clave: Fotografía abstracta, poshumanismo, realismo agencial, crisis ecológica, cosmotécnica.

Sumario: 1. Introduction. 2. Toward a Theoretical Framework for Abstract Photography in China 3. Revealing Light through Abstraction in Jiang Pengyi's Photography. 4. Disclosing the Unknown through Abstraction in Chen Xiaoyi's Photography. 5. A conclusion that is also a beginning. Bibliography.

Cómo citar: Figliulo, R. (2026). Decentring the Human Perspective through Abstraction: Two Examples from Contemporary Photography in China. *Arte, Individuo y Sociedad*, publicación en línea 1-18. <https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/aris.106512>

1. Introduction

Photography has long been shaped by social conventions that have conditioned both its form and its content. This is particularly true when photographers seek to represent the human world from a human perspective. But what happens when photography attempts to abstract reality through the use of its own apparatus? The resulting images certainly do not stray from certain visual conventions, but they allow us to carefully reflect on the ontology of the photographic image itself. At the same time, they open up a visual world where the human eye is no longer so essential.

In this paper I will analyse the photographic work of two Chinese artists, Jiang Pengyi 蒋鹏奕 (Hunan, b.1977) and Chen Xiaoyi 陈箫伊 (Sichuan, b.1992), who through their projects have expanded the usual boundaries of photographic practice and pursued an abstract result. They represent a recent example of photography produced in China that, on the one hand, experiments with the photographic medium and, on the other, reconnects with Chinese aesthetics and philosophy.

Within the context of photography produced in China, the two case studies examined here are particularly significant because they represent different generations of artists. Jiang Pengyi belongs to the generation that witnessed the profound social and artistic transformations of the turn of the millennium. He began his artistic career in a cultural environment marked by experimentation and increasingly engaged with the global art world. In contrast, Chen Xiaoyi is part of a younger generation of Chinese photographic artists who have benefited from international educational experiences. Her work emerges from a different point of departure, grounded in a process of returning to and rediscovering her cultural roots. Both artists are represented by major galleries in China and have established a significant presence within the Chinese contemporary art world throughout the 2020s. Their works can therefore be understood as expressions of a broader shift within Chinese contemporary art in the new millennium, characterised by an ongoing dialogue between local concerns and global artistic discourses.

The primary aim of this article is to offer a preliminary framework for the study of abstract photography in contemporary China. Rather than reducing this artistic practice to its formal dimensions alone, the article presents it as an alternative way of perceiving the world, one that moves beyond straightforward representational and didactic modes of image-making. The analysis developed here privileges photographic series and individual works not only in terms of their technical processes and aesthetic outcomes—both of which remain essential—but also through consideration of the multiple agents involved in their production and reception, drawing upon an interdisciplinary theoretical framework.

As will be shown, this type of photographic practice allows us to bring together perspectives from photographic theory, ideas derived from quantum physics, contemporary philosophical thought, and critical theories that have emerged in response to the environmental crisis. The article proceeds from the premise that these works function as sites of interconnection among diverse agents, including the artist and the human subject. However, unlike in humanistic or documentary photography, the human perspective no longer occupies a central or privileged position. The artist's perspective is no longer treated as absolute. This process of decentring the human, together with the persistent presence of natural elements and the relationships established with the surrounding environment, suggests that these works may contribute to forms of thinking capable of engaging productively with contemporary ecological concerns.

2. Toward a Theoretical Framework for Abstract Photography in China

The theoretical framework proposed here draws on key contributions to the study of experimental and abstract photography. It also engages with recent theories of material agency and with philosophical reflections inspired by developments in quantum physics. This branch of science has challenged the epistemological foundations upon which modern scientific knowledge has

traditionally been constructed. Such a paradigm shift can also be observed in contemporary photographic practice, particularly in abstract photography. As argued above, this form of photography emerges from the entanglement of multiple agents, and the resulting image cannot be understood as a transparent representation of reality. In this sense, abstract photography invites a relational and non-anthropocentric understanding of image-making.

Within this alternative mode of seeing, it is possible to identify affinities with intellectual traditions developed in China, traditions that may contribute to a renewed understanding of the relationship between humans and the natural world. This ecological perspective runs throughout the theoretical framework proposed here, linking photographic theory, theories of material agency, and broader reflections on the relationship between nature, matter, and perception.

The main context of these works is experimental photography, in the sense we find in the texts of Vilém Flusser ([1983] 2006). According to the philosopher, the experimental artist works against the apparatus, thus deactivating the pre-existing expectations created by society and the capitalist system. Experimenting with the apparatus has led many artists over the past century to create abstract visual products. In his study on the subject, Lyle Rexer speaks of an “undisclosed” photography that evades the figurative mimesis that the instrument has always pursued (2009, p.11). Rexer emphasizes that “the guarantee of a photograph is not its image,” but “it is its surface, its utter two-dimensionality” (2009, p.180). He further adds that in these experiments, photography serves as “the index of its self-awareness and proof of its continuing urge to transcend the visual through the visual” (Rexer 2009, p.12). Also Geoffrey Batchen referring to “the contradictory character of photographs made without a camera”, writes:

On the one hand, such photographs stress the materiality of the process of their making, its physicality and directness. But on the other, they offer an often-immaterial style of image, translucent and abstract in form and impossible to identify with the world they inhabit. They obstinately represent only themselves. (2016, p.22)

Abstract photography makes us reflect on the materiality of photography. What is important for our purposes is to recognize that these works cannot be understood solely through their final visual outcome. The image itself does not make visible all the processes, materials, and agents involved in its production. It allows us to forget about “representation” and focus on the creative process, the joint action of the artist and the apparatus, the natural phenomena, and the physical matter at play. In the case of abstract photography, therefore, the emphasis is not on referentiality, but on the creative act. This leads us to a repositioning of the human being in relation to photographic practice. Photography is, according to Rexer, “a looking with” (2009, 11). This discussion leads us to Karen Barad’s theory of agential realism, according to which “[...] a performative account insists on understanding thinking, observing, and theorizing as practices of engagement with, and as part of, the world in which we have our being” (2007, p.133). If, for Rexer, photography is performative, where “the performer is light” (2009, p.12), Barad also calls for the use of a “post-humanist performative approach” (2007, p.135). In the photographic practices discussed in this article, the human does not definitively disappear; rather, it is repositioned as one agent among many involved in the production of the image. According to theoretical physics, an external view is inconceivable because the external perspective is an illusion: “What exists are only internal perspectives on the world which are partial and reflect one another”, Carlo Rovelli maintains, “The world is this reciprocal reflection of perspectives” (2021, p.182). The abstract photographs discussed in this article follow this principle: the anthropocentric viewpoint of humanistic photography has been surpassed. The observing subjects either withdraw to allow the apparatus and the materials to work in line with their intrinsic nature, or they use the photographic medium to create a personal, inclusive, and non-isolating vision of the external world. The central argument of this article is that these photographs do not signify the elimination of the human being, but rather show how the human being exists on the same level as nature. What is transcended is the anthropocentric gaze.

One objective of this article is to reconsider the photographic medium from a non-human perspective, following Joanna Zylinska’s work, in which she proposes “treating photography as a set of processes rather than just objects, it draws on theories of mediation, media ecology, and

post-humanism with a view to overcoming the entrenched humanism of the traditional debates on the medium so far” (2017, p.4). Joanna Zylińska’s theory is situated within the critical theory of ecological crisis, which will also be addressed in this study. The works analysed here often make a clear critique of the changing landscape due to the global environmental crisis. Sometimes the reference is subtle when nature is explicitly at the centre of the image. Other times, it is forced by my analysis when, looking beyond abstract forms, we find the presence of natural and physical processes that can help us understand complex phenomena on planet Earth.

One of the most important contributions of these photographic works is the pedagogical role they play in relation to nature. The abstract works of Jiang and Chen can help us to “learn to see” from the perspective of the living being, as understood by Estelle Zhong Mengual (2021). This French scholar argues that we need to reconsider our view of non-human living beings and regard them as agents rather than as mere objects to be analysed or exploited. In the case of China, there is a strand of its philosophical tradition that emphasises the importance of not creating a separation between human beings and the living world. Along the lines of Eric S. Nelson, who considers certain aspects of this tradition to be useful in overcoming the separation between human beings and nature, for instance when he states that:

Distinctive forms of Daoist and Chan discourse and practice—in their own ways across their differences—indicate a therapeutics and embodied practices of emptying that dismantle the illusions of self-power and the mastery and domination of nature that reflects our current ecological crisis-tendencies. (2021, p.134)

My intention in this article is not to reduce two artists who openly draw on philosophical traditions developed in this part of the world to a matter of “cultural essentialism” or “self-Orientalism”. Rather, I ask whether a perspective often dismissed as “reactionary” might instead be understood as a productive and progressive form of discourse. For this reason, I am introducing the concept of “cosmotechnics” by philosopher Yuk Hui: “[...] we aim to renew a form of life and cosmotechnics that would consciously subtract itself from and deviate from the homogeneous becoming of the technological world” (2016, p.309). By analysing these two photographers, it is possible to approach their work through the prism of local philosophical thought, starting from a perspective that does not imply an essentialist intention, “but must be a locality that appropriates the global instead of being simply produced and reproduced by the global” (Hui 2016, p.307). The aim is to reflect on a “cosmotechnics” of photography developed locally, which opens up to a global discussion on issues such as relationships with living beings or the degradation of landscapes in the context of the global ecological crisis.

The abstract photographic image manages to shift reflections on the reality of all living beings to a philosophical and conceptual plane. However, above all, it operates at the level of intuition. Unlike humanistic photography, it does not seek to establish a privileged viewpoint or to objectify its subject. Some examples that we will see below are not even reproducible as figurative photography because the matrix and the image are inseparable. No element dominates others through its action. The photograph itself, like the person who created it, is just one of the infinite points that characterise this network of relationships that generates reality.

3. Revealing Light through Abstraction in Jiang Pengyi’s Photography

When discussing abstract photography in contemporary China, Jiang Pengyi is one of the first artists who comes to mind. In the most recent phase of his career, he has developed a deep interest in photographic experimentation, including exercises both with and without the camera. His main aim has been to explore the role of light in photographic practice and the use of photographic materials in an almost sculptural manner. These experiments have led him to almost completely abandon figurative representation. This qualification is necessary because alongside these practices, which will be analysed below, he has continued to photograph Chinese reality through a documentary gaze.

The experiments, which in some ways work as theoretical reflections on the photographic medium, begin with the 2012 series called “Everything Illuminates” (*Ziyou zhi wu* 自有之物). In

this project, Jiang covered various types of objects with liquid wax mixed with fluorescent powder and then photographed them in the dark. (Figliulo, 2025) The result made it look as if the objects had appeared out of nowhere. The photographic tool here plays the role of recording the brightness that emphasises the physical boundaries of the objects. The form of the objects was illuminated, and Jiang captured their appearance in photographic format. The physical relationship between the object and the recording instrument was made possible using light, a basic element in photographic reproduction. Although the artist's intention is maintained in this case, Jiang has tried to eliminate it in many of his subsequent projects.

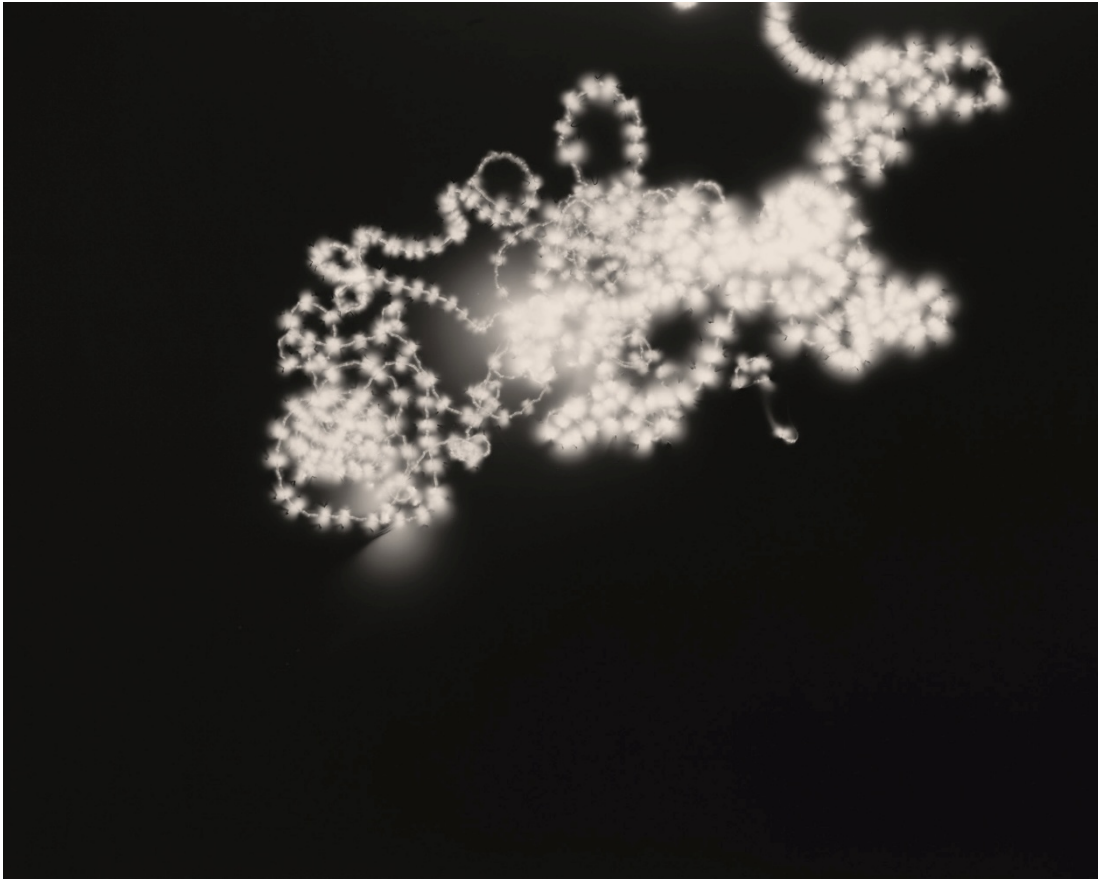


Figure 1: Jiang Pengyi, *Dark Addiction 7'51'''*, 2013, Archival inkjet print, mounted on aluminum panel, black acrylic glass, 120x150cm. Courtesy of Jiang Pengyi and ShanghArt Gallery.

One of Jiang's earliest abstract experiments is a very peculiar type of "portrait". In the series "Dark Addiction" (*You'an zhi ai* 幽暗之爱) from 2013 (Fig.1), he recorded the luminescence emitted by a group of fireflies that he had trapped in a box on photosensitive paper. In some cases, for more than a day, in others for just a few hours; the fireflies attempted to complete their life cycle inside the box, as the generated luminescence is crucial for mating. The result is an abstract picture composed of white dots and lines on a black background. Recording the subject is not figurative; it is only possible due to its natural ability to emit light.

In the 2016 series "In Some Time" (*Zai moushi* 在某時) the process was also based on something emitting light (Fig.2). In this case it was coloured fluorescent paper, that Jiang put in contact with 4x5 photographic film. The camera was unnecessary here. Jiang combined two

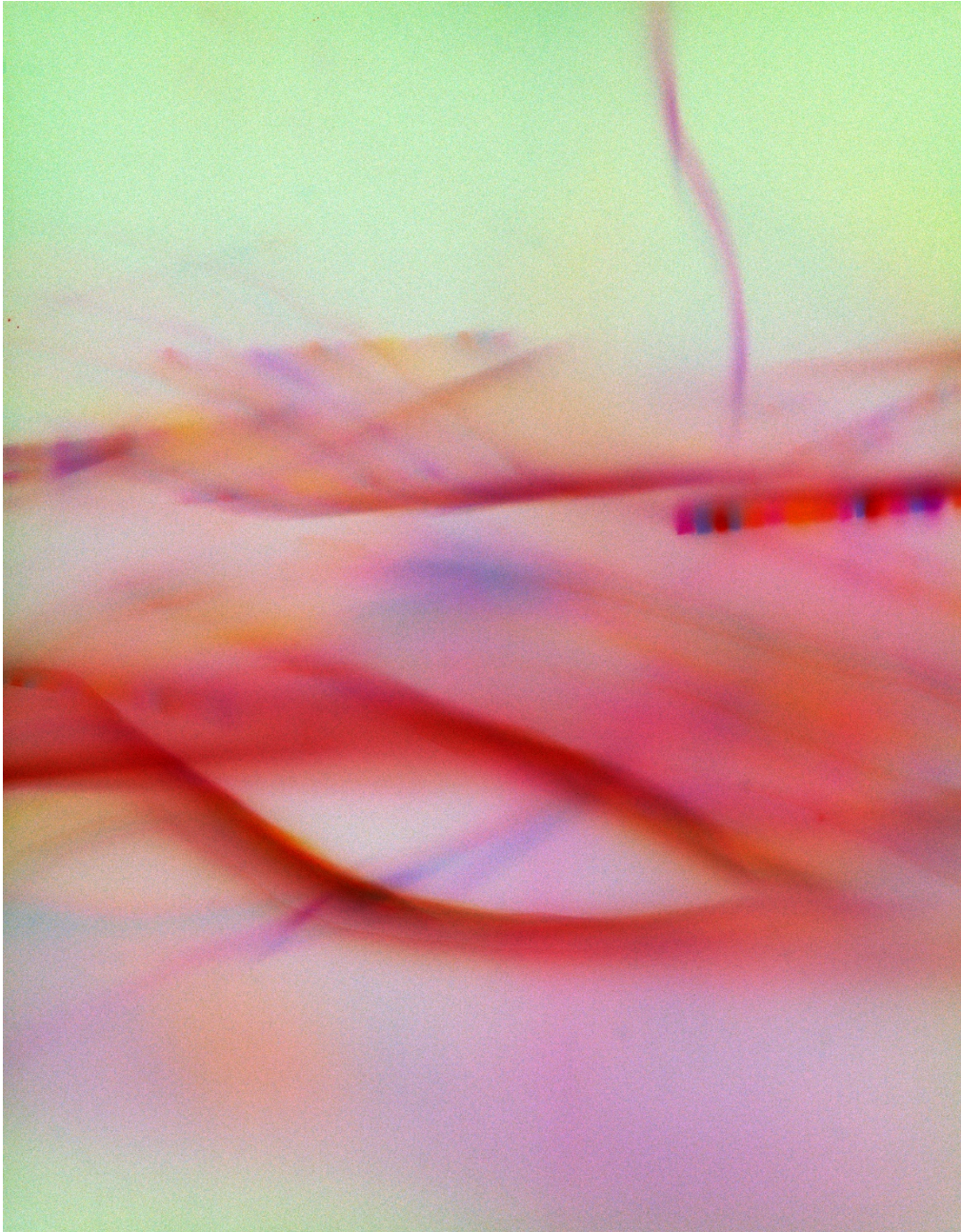


Figure 2: Jiang Pengyi, *In Some Time NO.5*, 178.6x140cm, 2016. Courtesy of Jiang Pengyi and ShangArt Gallery.

objects with opposing polarities. The artist's aim was to provoke an encounter between these two objects, but the result is always beyond his control. Speaking about his work, Jiang stated:

My work can be called 'improvised experimental photography'. That indicates I indulge in my openness to ignorance to see the light-sensitive material as a canvas, a space or a living body based on non-prejudgments or non-predictions by utilising my language barriers. (Sheih, August 1, 2019)

Jiang's work follows a line of experimentation that moves in a "post-humanist" direction. Human beings, culture, and society are no longer the primary objects of representation. Instead, the viewer encounters the material and visual traces of interactions between human and non-human agents. Here, we find a connection between the agential realism theorised by Barad, who defines it as a "post-humanist performative approach" and a "moving away from the representationalist trap of geometrical optics, I shift the focus to physical optics, to questions of

diffraction rather than *reflection*” (2007, p.135). It is within the theoretical developments related to quantum physics and post-human ontology that we find a new way of approaching photographic theory and the work of these artists. The focus of the photographic act, in this type of practice, is no longer the human being. In a documentary made by Blindspot Gallery Jiang states: “The epiphany I’ve received from photography is to trace the nature of things and let things follow their own rhythm. I never try to manipulate or rule it” (Blindspot Gallery 2017, min. 00:25 – 00:35). As in the case of “Dark Addiction”, we have seen how a subject from nature contributes to the realisation of the artwork: Jiang effectively allows the insects to generate abstract patterns on the photosensitive surface. The result is not controlled by the artist, but it is also not a product of chaos. It is the result of the insect’s will and movements that are “automatically” recorded.

In many of his images, Jiang continues his experimentation with the photographic apparatus, especially with materials specific to analogue photography. He works extensively with Polaroids and employs a lifting technique to create sculptural photographic images. Vilém Flusser would describe this as a struggle between the photographer and the apparatus, as if they were two separate entities. In reality, however, the perception is that a form of cooperation emerges between the photographer and the apparatus. Moreover, the agents that contribute to the production of the photographic image are not limited to the human being and the apparatus. One of the elements in this encounter is often natural.



Figure 3: Jiang Pengyi, *Foresight No.13*, 2017 -2018, Archival inkjet print, mounted on aluminium panel, toughened acrylic, 188x150cm. Courtesy of Jiang Pengyi and ShanghArt Gallery.

In the series “Foresight” (*Yujian* 预见) from 2017-2018 (Fig.3), it is decaying food that generates abstract forms, producing unexpected colour formations. What emerges is a dialogue between the chemical elements that make up the different materials. As Geoffrey Batchen writes with regard to cameraless photography, as is the case in this project:

Photographic contact printing, where the medium has been distilled to its simplest contiguous function, allows its referents to speak to us directly, transitively if you like. They speak of themselves, as themselves. And this gives them an unusually powerful pictorial presence. (2016, p.40)



Figure 4: Jiang Pengyi, *Sun! Sun! No.10*, 2018, Archival inkjet print, mounted on aluminium panel, toughened acrylic, 145x174x145.9x189.4cm. Courtesy of Jiang Pengyi and ShanghArt Gallery.

In another series Jiang creates an interesting interaction between the photographer, the apparatus, and the action of a natural element. The photographs in the series “Sun! Sun!” (*Taiyang! Taiyang!* 太阳! 太阳!) from 2018-2020 are the result of contact between sunlight and a piece of cardboard covering photosensitive film; often, Jiang amplifies the effect of sunlight using a magnifying glass (Fig.4). Here, the artist’s action is active and decisive because it determines the position of the burn marks created by the sunlight on the cardboard, which then form the abstract shapes in the final picture. However, the result is always unpredictable. As Batchen writes: “chance plays a key role in the genesis of these photographs. Indeed, it might be said that, in cameraless photography, chance is the author and ‘reality’ the medium” (2016, p.19). Does this represent a different kind of realism? In “Edge of Vision”, Rexer describes abstract photography as an “undisclosed” photography because it doesn’t create a clearly defined picture. Instead, it is a photograph undergoing a continuous process of “revealing”. Or at least, the importance of the artwork lies more in the act of revelation than in the representation of a given object or situation. The creative action is the subject of the artwork. An action that is not solely human. Here, the relationship between the elements becomes crucial and for Jiang, it is a metaphor for human existence:

The same applies to the fragile nature of life that makes it impossible not to depend on others or anything else. The body (the light-sensitive material) belongs to the individual, but the ‘I’, or self, does not belong to the individual entirely and cannot exist without sunlight. (Ou, July 22, 2022)

From his words we can discern an interesting reflection on the impossibility of absolute control over reality on the part of the subject who carries out, or is part of, the photographic process. This constitutes a reference to theories of relationality that underpin new aesthetic conceptions as well as theories in physics, which we have mentioned earlier or will discuss in the following sections.

This series focuses on the rays of light emanating from the sun as the main element. The sun’s rays make us think of the concept of “hyper-objects”, which, according to Timothy Morton (2013), are entities that escape human understanding. Photography, and action like Jiang’s, can help us to understand certain phenomena. As Zylinska states “all photography, with its capacity to capture light and make it act upon surfaces, acts as a cue for the goings-on of deep time, well beyond human control and human existence” (2017, p.126). Jiang’s photographic action, therefore, aligns with the physical phenomena of the universe, such as the production and emanation of sunlight through space and its contact with the Earth’s surface. Abstract photography, completely detached from mimetic representations of reality, allows us to move beyond this dominant perspective. It is a process of decentring the human photographic vision. Here, the human being is an important but not central element. It is a natural and artificial process at the same time, created through the combined action of the human being, the photographic apparatus, and other natural (fireflies, sun, food, etc.) and non-natural (fluorescent industrial materials) elements. This corresponds to what Barad defines as phenomena that are “the ontological inseparability/entanglement of intra-acting ‘agencies’” (2007, p.139). According to Barad, we are not responsible for these “cuts” because we choose when to create them, “but because we are an agential part of the material becoming of the universe” (2007, p.178).



Figure 5: Jiang Pengyi, *Gravel Fathoms the Sea No.1*, 2020, B&W inkjet print, Mounted on aluminium panel, 160x235cm. Courtesy of Jiang Pengyi and ShanghArt Gallery.

The last series I want to analyse, in contrast to what I have focused on so far, is figurative. The series “Gravel Fathoms the Sea” (*Lishi liangjiele dahai* 砾石谅解了大海) from 2020 was created by Jiang during a journey through the Gobi Desert (Fig.5). The images depict the dark terrain of the desert landscape and the mountains rising on the horizon. Shot with a large format camera, they are the result of a careful selection of subjects and visual positions. In this case, the artist’s act is voluntary, intentional, sought after, and found. Despite being figurative images, the results seem closer to an abstract representation of nature. The absence of living beings, both human and non-human, as well as the absence of vegetation or buildings, causes some of the images to be completely flat, composed of lines and broad shapes in a single tone. Through the use of black and white, Jiang reminds us of traditional Chinese landscape painting, or *Shanshui* (Mountains and water). In this case, however, there are mountains (*shan*), but there is no water (*shui*). Where millions of years ago there were lakes, rivers, and seas, now there is a monotonous landscape of sand and rocks. Once again, the idea of a temporality inconceivable to the human being reappears. In light of the climate crisis, we are faced with an explicit warning about the future of the Earth. As Zylinska states:

Seen in the framework of the Anthropocene, photography reminds us of the passage of time across larger scales: it brings home the fact that there will be a time not just after the life of our mother, say, but also after the life of any other human on earth. (2017, p.97)

Zylinska does not take a pessimistic view; on the contrary, she believes in the ability of photography to infuse life and hope into this dramatic context, precisely because of its close relationship with phenomena such as light. One common *leitmotif* in Jiang’s work is that his is a process of the continuous “unveiling” of light using photographic apparatus. Jiang’s abstract photography is not a passive process. Rather, it remains in a constant state of activation and unfolding.

4. Disclosing the Unknown through Abstraction in Chen Xiaoyi's Photography

In his book "Art and Cosmotechnics" Hui states: "What the painting or the garden want to make *sensible* is not what is already figurative and visible, but what is not yet there, *invisible* – whether uncanny, sublime, or unknowable" (2021, p.274). The search for a reality that appears inexplicable or resistant to representation constitutes one of the central concerns of Chen Xiaoyi's practice, when she decided to embark on the project that would lead to her discovery: "I instinctively abandon the narrative of the image, which is a certain kind of questioning from my background in photojournalism. So, turning into the ineffable Eastern philosophy, it was the path I re-understood and saw at that time" (X. Chen, personal communication, May 25, 2021). The use of black and white, photogravure and pictures that elude mimetic figuration are predominant characteristics of Chen Xiaoyi's debut. While studying in London, far from her cultural environment, Chen developed this series under the influence of traditional Chinese aesthetics and philosophy. In an interview released to the author Chen affirmed:

The ancient traditional thought is an option for me in that time. From the geographical reason, I was studying in the UK at that time, I seemed to be able to really touch the essence of the East from farther away. (X. Chen, personal communication, May 25, 2021)

Chen refers to traditional thought in the title of the series, "Koan", and it already seems like a statement of intent. The Japanese term, derived from the Chinese "*gong'an*", refers to one of the practices at the core of Zen discipline - a dialogue or story, explained by the master to his pupils, that defies the logic of thought. As Chen affirmed in the introduction to the project:

In Zen Buddhism, Koan is a story or riddle used to help in the attainment of a state of spontaneous reflection, free from planning and analytical thought. In contradiction to Western philosophy, the Koan philosophy emphasises the inadequacy of language and words, and the importance of intuition over reason and logic, to transform the self. (Chen n.d.-c)

This concept or practice applied to the creation of photographic images brings to mind the words that Rosalind Krauss uses when referring to the works of James Welling and Holly Wright, who, through their abstract photography "short-circuit" the "code" to open up a new mode that defies visual modernity (Krauss 2004, p.239).



Figure 6: Chen Xiaoyi, *Seed*, from the series *Koan*, 2014, photogravure, n.s. Courtesy of Chen Xiaoyi.

The “Koan” effect emerges through images that represent reality not in a didactic or explicit manner, but through an evocative visual language that opens itself to multiple interpretations: in Chen’s series, we do not know if what we see of a tree is the result of a direct vision or the reflection on another surface, a body of water, or a windowpane. The subjects of the photographs in this series are essentially landscapes or natural elements. Their representation is always on the verge of abstraction. As was the case in Chinese painting tradition, it does not reach total abstraction; the artist decides to stop before presenting pure forms. As Jullien argues: “The form is to be transcended, but it cannot be “modified” ([2003] 2009, p.115). The observer’s eye must be able to recognise the subject of the image. The result is the presentation of surfaces, lines, and forms found in nature, just as they are. As the artist states: “I try to explore beneath the surface of things by simplification and abstraction to awaken spiritual awareness and intuition before the symbolic” (Chen n.d.-c). Chen’s work openly engages with essentialist notions of cultural tradition and maintains a sustained dialogue with idealised conceptions of the past. Yet, before reducing her discourse to yet another example of self-Orientalism, let us return once again to Eric S. Nelson (2021, p.56), who considers it anachronistic to connect concepts drawn from Chan or Taoist philosophical traditions to the current ecological situation; nevertheless, engaging with them “continues to teach lessons and inspire exemplary models that can inform and potentially transform contemporary reflection on ecology and the environment” (Nelson 2021, p.56).

In Chen’s photographs, the human being is absent, or at least partially absent. Here too, Chen evades or intends to evade the human gaze or the anthropocentric point of view. The only human elements that appear in the series are two palms. The first one is recognisable: an open hand (Fig.6). Inside the hand we can distinguish a little black dot; an element that creates a rupturing impact on our logical construction of images. Its fleeting meaning can be opened up to multiple interpretations. In the second example, the palm of a hand is paired with the surface of a leaf. A visual correspondence is thus created between the lines of the hand and those of the leaf. Between the human element and the natural element there is continuity, not opposition.



Figure 7: Chen Xiaoyi, *Land*, from the series *Koan*, 2014, photogravure, n.s. Courtesy of Chen Xiaoyi.

The lines on the hand and on the leaf create another series of correspondences with other photographs: they are not so different from those that traverse the arid land (Fig. 7) or the mountains. The physical forms of the person blend with those of nature. It is a new type of humanism, where the human being is not “looking at” or “analysing” out of nowhere, but instead is part of the world he or she inhabits and observes. Some images in the series seem to recreate the effect of a microscopic vision. A vision that is not human. In this case, we once again see that there is no struggle between the photographer and the apparatus, but instead a cooperation. There is no alliance between the two to create an objective and objectifying vision. Both are part of the same active process of the disclosure of reality.

Chen constantly breaks away from the typical construction of perspective. She embraces a different discourse, abandoning the visual “episteme” to which photography has been tied throughout its history. The linear perspective conceived of human vision as an external vision, creating a clear separation between subject and object. Chen’s pictures, instead, aim to overcome this historical opposition. It is the conceptualisation of a new aesthetic, which Susan Buck-Morss (December 11, 2013) defines as a “synaesthetic system” in the following excerpt: “[...] we will call this aesthetic system of sense-consciousness, decentered from the classical subject, wherein external sense-perceptions come together with the internal images of memory and anticipation, the ‘synaesthetic system’”. In this project, Chen presents the encounter with otherness through a gaze that does not objectify it. In the 1970s, Lee Ufan spoke of the need to escape from the prevailing reification in industrial society at that time. Lee presents the “gestures” of Mono-ha artists as follows: “That is to say, gestures are a means of expression that makes things just as they are into things *just as they are*, and the mechanism responsible for this shift becomes a mediation that enables encounters” (2012, p.222). Here, the concept of an “encounter” between subject and object is important, an encounter that does not create a clear and precise separation, but a discourse of relation.

The material support on which the images are produced appears to play a crucial role in Chen Xiaoyi's practice. In her first project, she experimented with photogravure, then created a photobook, and in her recent projects, she has turned to images printed on aluminium plates.



Figure 8: *Foam, Form - Phase II*, 2019, UV print on curved Aluminium plate, 150x180 cm each.
Courtesy of Chen Xiaoyi.

Between 2019 and 2020, she worked on the “Streit” (*Zhengzhi* 争执) project, which included installations, videos, and photography. Here abstract images were reproduced on a metal surface. In the series “Foam, Form: Phase II” (Fig.8), part of the project, she photographically captured the moment between the maximum expansion and bursting of soap bubbles. In the statement she affirms:

Huge bubbles are usually found in the entertaining magic shows, which carry many metaphors, this fantastic visual experience often disappear in an instant, just as modern Crystal Palace is a huge bubble, the most ideal symbol of capital globalization, and modernity is also point of everything in transition, fleeting, accidental, and all that is solid melts into air. (Chen n.d.-b)

These bubbles appeared in their fluid conformation, between solid, liquid, and aerial states, in a process of complete ephemeral materialisation. Then the picture is printed on a negative, on folded aluminium sheets; and the bubble takes on bluish tones. Chen once again pushes the boundaries of representation by photographing a material that is constantly transforming.

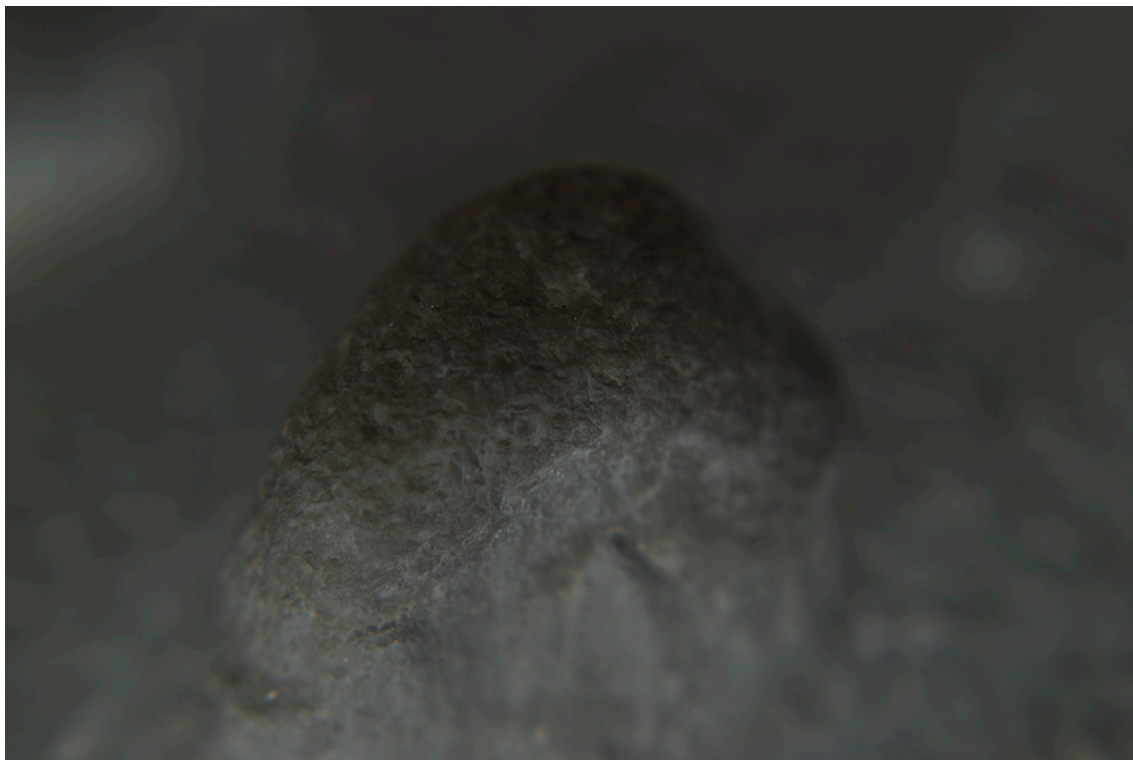


Figure 9: Chen Xiaoyi, 2020, *Svayambhuv #1*, Giclée print, 120x80cm. Courtesy of Chen Xiaoyi.

In this project she presented another photographic series, titled “Svayambhuv”, a term in Sanskrit referring to the natural evolution of things (Fig.9). In this project, Chen’s photographic acts remind us of the scientific process of recording natural elements. Although the image is not clear as a scientific reproduction, because Chen decided to present it as a negative. The tones of the developed film break away from a naturalistic representation. The effect is one of estrangement. She approached the process of salt extraction through an intimate photographic investigation.

[Figure 10 here]



Figure 10: Chen Xiaoyi, *Palmistry of the mountain*, 2021, UV print on Aluminum plate, 50x22 cm, 51 pieces. Courtesy of Chen Xiaoyi.

The extraction of raw material by humans is central to a more recent project: “The Epoch of Rippling Hengduan Mountains - I am supposed to tell you some of the words I heard deep down in the sea”¹ between 2021-2022 which encompasses various experiments, not limited to photography. She also created videos and various installations, which together form a cohesive whole. The objective is to deeply reflect upon the current state of a specific region, not far from where Chen resides, the mountains of Hengduan in Sichuan. Her interest in this landscape seems to stem from a desire for a return to the local: “Therefore, in the experience that I must experience, I began to explore the power of connecting the sense of locality, so the mountains began to appear that they had a story of themselves’ to tell” (Chen n.d.-a). But above all, there is an intention to reflect on the relationship forged between humans and the land in these places. Chen developed an original perspective on the processes of mining that has inevitably altered this relationship where the human hand is referenced both conceptually and visually. Chen refers to the practice of reading lines on one’s palm to analyse a person’s past, present, and future, in the series “Palmistry of the Mountain” (*Shan de shouxian* 山的手相) (2021). Chen photographs from above the mining exploitation locations that have profoundly altered the landscape of the Mountains. The photographs are then developed in high contrast, erasing the landscape’s shadows, and highlighting human intervention upon it (Fig.10). Chen finally prints the photographic images on aluminium plate, which almost suggests the substance of the material extracted from the land. The lines on the territory created by the human “hand” establish, according to the artist, a strange visual connection with the lines on the human hand. At this point, the artist asks: “Can we do some fortune-telling for them? Can we predict their destiny, or even the direction of our own destiny as human beings?” (Chen n.d.-d). These are stories that traverse time, and thus, in Chen’s recent work, we find a reflection on the recent ecological crisis. This photographic project allows us to, using the words of Zylinska, “scale down the ‘deep time’ of non-human history to the human measure of duration and perception, while also reconnecting us to a temporal flow of matter and energy” (2017, p.95). Her methodology takes on a non-human photographic vision. The artist affirms: “From the past mining industry to today’s mountain ecology, I try ‘image-

¹ The title refers to a text written by the poet Paul Celan.

scanning' the western mountains through a broader narrative" (Chen n.d.-d). Her objective is "to scan" this geographical place that is the result of the transformation of the terrestrial surface on the one hand and of human action on the other hand. The former has occurred gradually over centuries, while the latter has taken place extraordinarily rapidly over a few decades. A sort of parallelism is drawn between direct human action on the territory through the extraction of valuable material and the analytical gaze of non-human visual recording apparatuses capturing the landscape. Once again, the artist becomes the mediator, the one who enables the encounter. It is she who promotes a "broader narrative". Through an apparatus that extends human vision, Chen Xiaoyi succeeds in establishing a dialogue between the human beings who have altered the landscape, the natural scenery, and the broader context of the ecological crisis. This recent project suggests a profound reflection on the current condition of our planet. Can photography help us to understand these ongoing changes within the context of this crisis?

5. A conclusion that is also a beginning

This article has proposed an initial framework for understanding abstract photography in contemporary China. The works discussed here expand the boundaries of the photographic medium, challenging established conceptions of photographic images and their uses.

Both artists move away from figurative representation and instead focus on the processes intrinsic to photographic practice, as well as on the functioning and creative possibilities of cameras, lenses, photographic paper, film, and other photographic materials. Their work constitutes a dialogue with the multiple agents involved in image production. At times, some of these agents are privileged over others, depending on the conceptual dimension of the project or the search for a particular visual result. However, the outcome always tends toward, or achieves, abstraction.

Their work does not represent a break with the humanist vision; rather, it can be understood as an alternative version of humanism in which the human being is no longer central. Both artists create the conditions for an "encounter" among different materials and agents, the final result of which is then presented in a further encounter with the public. Often, this encounter takes place not through a reproduction of the work but through the work itself, generating an experience that is visual and physical at the same time, as occurs in other areas of artistic production.

If we compare the work of these two artists, we can see that they begin from different personal trajectories and develop markedly different artistic inquiries. These two artists have been selected not because of stylistic affinities. The objective of this article is to present two emblematic cases of abstract photography within the context of contemporary photographic production in China, while emphasizing that they represent two different approaches to abstraction. Jiang Pengyi moves between extreme experimentation with photographic materials and the search for a conceptual support that is often as abstract as the results produced by the processes he explores. For Chen Xiaoyi, by contrast, abstraction becomes a more powerful means than figurative representation for expressing profound reflections on human existence and the landscape in which we live.

In this attempt to introduce examples of abstract photography within recent Chinese photographic production, we encounter a discourse that has both local and global implications. Moving beyond anthropocentrism is a necessary step in reconstructing our relationship with nature. These examples demonstrate that abstract photography can contribute to this discussion.

References

- Barad, Karen. (2007). *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Duke University Press.
- Batchen, Geoffrey. (2016). "Emanations: the Art of Cameraless Photograph." In *Emanations: The Art of the Cameraless Photograph*, exhibition catalogue, The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand, from April 29 to August 14, 2016. Prestel Verlag.

- Blindspot Gallery. (August 25, 2017). *Jiang Pengyi by Sola*. [Video]. Vimeo.
https://vimeo.com/231023829?embedded=true&source=vimeo_logo&owner=54815219
- Buck-Morss, Susan. (December 11, 2013). *Aesthetics and Anaesthetics – Part I*. Susan Buck-Morss webpage. <https://www.susanbuckmorss.info/text/aesthetics-and-anaesthetics-part-i/>.
- Chen, Xiaoyi. (n.d.-a). *The Epoch of Rippling Hengduan Mountains - I Am Supposed to Tell You Some of the Words I Heard Deep Down in the Sea*. Chen Xiaoyi webpage.
<https://chenxiaoyi.net/The-Epoch-Of-Rippling-Hengduan-Mountains>.
- Chen Xiaoyi, (n.d.-b). *Foam, Form – Phase II*. Chen Xiaoyi webpage.
<https://chenxiaoyi.net/Foam-Form-Phase-II>.
- Chen, Xiaoyi. (n.d.-c). *Koan*. Chen Xiaoyi webpage. <https://chenxiaoyi.net/Koan>.
- Chen, Xiaoyi. (n.d.-d). *Palmistry of The Mountain*. Chen Xiaoyi webpage.
<https://chenxiaoyi.net/Palmistry-of-the-Mountain>.
- Figliulo, Roberto. (2025). Through an (extra)ordinary lens: Appearing and disappearing objects in the photographic works of Li Jun and Jiang Pengyi. *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Volume 12, Issue 2-3, 281 – 299. https://doi.org/10.1386/jcca_00123_1
- Flusser, Vilém. ([1983] 2006). *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*. Reaktion Books.
- Hui, Yuk. (2016). *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotechnics*. Urbanomic.
- Hui, Yuk. (2021). *Art and Cosmotechnics*. University of Minnesota Press; e-flux.
- Jullien, François. ([2003] 2009). *The Great Image Has No Form or On the Nonobject through Painting*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Krauss, Rosalind. (2004). Fotografía y abstracción. In Jorge Ribalta (Ed.), *Efecto real: debates posmodernos sobre fotografía* (pp.231-239). Editorial Gustavo Gili.
- Lee, Ufan. (2012). In Search of Encounter: The Sources of Contemporary Art (1970). In Doryun Chong, Michio Hayashi, Kenji Kajiya, and Fumihiko Sumitomo (Eds.), *From Postwar to Postmodern: Art in Japan 1945-1989* (pp.218-223). The Museum of Modern Art.
- Morton, Timothy. (2013). *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. The MIT Press.
- Nelson, Eric S. (2021). *Daoism and Environmental Philosophy: Nourishing Life*. Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429399145>
- Ou, Sequin. (July 22, 2022). *The human vitality in Jiang Pengyi's experimental photography. Review of 'Streams over the serried stones'*. Shanghart Gallery webpage.
<https://www.shanghartgallery.com/galleryarchive/texts/id/10907>.
- Rexer, Lyle. (2009). *The Edge of Vision: The Rise of Abstraction in Photography*. Aperture.
- Rovelli, Carlo. (2021). *Helgoland: Making Sense of the Quantum Revolution*. Riverhead Books.
- Schaefer, William. (2017). *Shadow Modernism: Photography, Writing, and Space in Shanghai, 1925-1937*. Duke University Press.
- Sheih, Anita. (August 1, 2019). *Photographic Experimentation: Interview with Jiang Pengyi*. Musée. <https://museemagazine.com/features/2019/8/1/photographic-experimentation-interview-with-jiang-pengyi>
- Zhong Mengual, Estelle. 2021. *Apprendre à voir: Le point de vue du vivant*. Actes Sud.
- Zylinska, Joanna. (2017). *Nonhuman Photography*. The MIT Press.