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YOU CAN'T PHOTOSHOP THIS MOUNTAIN



Taiwanese artist Wu Chi-Tsung's work transcends space and time.

THE EPIC BLUE mountain-scape you see above is a composite of hundreds of image layers. But they weren't made with Photoshop—or a digital camera, for that matter.

Instead, artist Wu Chi-Tsung turned to analog methods from the past. He drew from both the Western tradition of cyanotype-making, developed by Sir John Herschel in 1842, and Eastern Shan Shui ("mountains and water") painting, which dates to 5th-century China.

"Nowadays, any effect can be easily achieved digitally," Wu says. "I'm determined to take one step back, toward older methods that are closer to nature, bringing more possibilities of randomness."

Wu's approach is inspired by the late artist Ni Zaiqin, a Taiwanese traditional painter known for his experimental collages. When Wu began working as his assistant, more than a decade ago, he preferred Western art and materials, dismissing the brush-and-ink formula of traditional Chinese painting as too constricting. But his boss showed him how free and audacious the old art form could be, with the landscape representing a "reflection of the personal spiritual world." Rather than limiting himself to any single time or place, he began making art that would transcend both, culminating in his series Cyano-Collage in 2015.

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Wu uses acrylic gel to paste the cyanotypes onto a huge canvas in his studio.

Each collage takes up to two months to complete. To begin, Wu covers dozens of sheets of xuan (rice) paper, roughly 4 by 8 feet, with an emulsion made from iron compounds that turn deep blue after being exposed to sunlight. He lays them outside for up to an hour, all the while crumpling and creasing the paper with his hands to form jagged lines recalling cliffs and precipices—a reinterpretation of the cun fa texturing brushstrokes in Shan Shui.

After washing the paper to fix the chemicals, it's time to compose the image. Wu selects dozens of wrinkled papers and individually pastes them flat onto the canvas, sealing each layer with acrylic gel before adding a new one. Sometimes he adds a blank sheet to create depth, erase part of an image, or simply leave space for the imagination. He finishes with a varnish to protect against damaging UV rays.

The final mountain range inspires the same jolt of awe and wonder as a Song Dynasty painting or Ansel Adams photograph. It's a masterful blend of East and West, past and present—one you can't photograph, much less Photoshop.

Images from Cyano Collage are on view in Abstract by Nature at Sean Kelly Gallery in New York through August 2.