

# M + B

IMA

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Phil Chang's art practice starts with questions; an essential but not immediately obvious statement about his relationship with the medium of photography. Astutely aware of the conditions of our contemporary image world, the impetus for Chang's recent bodies of work concern whether the photographic ideas that he postulates and problematizes are best addressed through the rendering of photographic works or by other means. Chang works slowly and with the direction and determination that comes from having well formed ideas already in place. With the intellectual ground work already set, his practice is focused on prompting the viewer to pay attention to the contemporary character of photography. Through such a thoughtful practice, he creates what will likely become some of the most enduring experiences of photographic thinking of this point in time.

Visiting his Los Angeles studio to see the progress on his 'Works on Paper' series, I can sense that so much of the intellectual work is already done. The works are startlingly simple; with a single or double strokes of unmixed printing pigments on different stocks of inkjet paper. Each work is titled with the type and colour of the ink and the brand name of the paper stock, reminding us of the industrial authorship of photographic materials. The experience of these striking works distils and focuses our thoughts on the undiluted affect of contemporary photography's ubiquitous materials without the smokescreen of an ostensible photographic subject or a philosophical title. Through their deliberate transparency and simplicity, these works declare their status as art and could not be mistaken for or repurposed as illustrations or advertisements. The questions that have driven Chang's eloquently pared down interrogation of photographic properties are apposite for the current arc of photography within contemporary art, speculating on whether it is possible to make a 'straight' photograph using the inkjet process as both material and subject and take the medium outside of its established definition. Chang circumvents the automated layers of photographic capture and post-production in order to create a direct and tangible experience of the default technological properties of the medium.

Phil Chang's active choice for 'Works on Paper' to work with such an economy of means not only speaks to the material properties of photography but also to the idea of what can constitute a photographic object. His apparently simple repetition of the stripe of pigment ink through each unique and hand-rendered gesture removes the medium's infinite reproducibility. It's significant that Chang's single gestures are without artistic flourish; reducing the possibility of being read as virtuoso gestures (although they are thoughtful, of course, and read as determined markings) in the terms set out in contemporary painting and in particular the current vitality of abstract painting currently in Chang's home city of Los Angeles. Functioning as neither painterly or obviously photographic, his 'Works on Paper' remind us of what we forget to see and what gets lost in photographic depiction. In so doing, Chang makes photography's essential character - as a medium of translation - a subject on its own tangible and legible terms. As Chang states, "I'm happy to but up against the creative problems of now. I really enjoy the discontent that this creates in the working process in an age of image ubiquity. What does it mean to make pictures in an inkjet era? And to use the physical gesture of brushing, now the automated way to navigate photographic pixels? 'Works on Paper' relies on these active precedents as a way to transgress photography and work out how simple a gesture needs to be and how close to denying the material technological fact of contemporary photography. "

What distinguishes Chang from many of his contemporaries who are recalibrating contemporary art photography is the fundamental stability of the objects he creates. While we are seeing many fertile artistic practices that subvert, weaken and version the automated outcomes of pixel based software and the conventions of inkjet printing, Chang starts a new thread for our contemporary discourse about the idea of photography that circulates around his simple and definite works. Without the distraction of conventional photographic perspective and a subject in 'Work on Paper', Chang invites us to consider the idea of photography as something that we are capable of truly seeing.