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## Ch'an, the Beginner's Mind, and Conceptual Art: A Conversation between Artist Michael Zheng and Critic Max Blue

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## MAX BLUE

We have a common background, which is the San Francisco Art Institute, where we both studied. You came to the San Francisco Art Institute as a graduate student, after pivoting from a career as an engineer in tech, also in the Bay Area; and I came to the San Francisco Art Institute as an undergraduate, right out of high school. I was completely unprepared and had no idea what I was in for, and I think they rewarded my naïveté. I'm curious if you felt ready, when you started at the Art Institute, or if you had a similar experience of going into it with a beginner's mind.

## MICHAEL ZHENG

I think that's a good way of getting into it. I'll seize onto the word naïveté because it was the main thing that I came to the school with, since I came from a background in tech which had nothing to do with art. Even though I was very good at drawing since I was a child, I never thought of myself as an artist. So when I enrolled at SFAI, I was in the painting department, thinking I would be a painter. Basically, I was kicked out of the painting

department, because I started putting three-dimensional objects on my canvases. So, I ended up in the sculpture department. And then I started to do really weird stuff in the sculpture department. In my first ceramics class, I remember when the professor was introducing the materials—you know, the clay comes in a block—and there he was introducing the tool to cut the clay with, which is a steel wire. And I was just fascinated by this sensation of cutting. It's like cutting butter. I ended up not making any work, just cutting. The professor soon said, "I think you should try the New Genres department." That's how I ended up doing the kind of work I'm doing now, performance stuff.

## MB

I think we should talk about SFAI as a hub for conceptual art. I know you're highly influenced by Paul Kos, Tony Labat, and Tom Marioni. The first two were mentors of yours at SFAI. And something you said to me on the phone the other day that stuck in my head, which was that "Tony gave me the license to do the kind of outrageous things in the name of art that I wanted to do."

In the same conversation, you and I discussed how the Bay Area conceptual art movement feels poetic, not ideological. I'm wondering about the distinction for you between poetry and the poetic and doing outrageous things in the name of art, especially when so much of that poetry is really about the mundane, everyday poetry of life. But life can also be outrageous.

**MZ**

I love Tony's performances, but initially I couldn't help but ask, "How could this be art?" But they are in the art history books now. He told me something else that benefited me greatly, which was that if you feel compelled to do something, do it. If they can't tell you it's not art, it can be art. It's liberating. And I did do those pretty outrageous things, you know, including my first pretty serious performance piece, in which I had myself buried live, butt naked, for two hours. It culminated in a naked butt sticking out from the ground. It's titled "Groundbreaking." Nobody could tell me that wasn't art. It actually got me into a biennial right after. I was a student at the time. So that was the kind of encounter that I had under the tutorage of Tony.

And then, in terms of the poetic part, I think that Paul Kos's work very directly influenced me. His work isn't in your face, but powerful in a poetic way, very respectful of the viewer. That touched me very deeply, in a very gentle way. Later, when he became my mentor, I had a close and personal learning experience with him. And I think it instilled the poetic part in my work as well.

In terms of the mundane, I think my attraction to the poetic concept is from the habit and ability to see things as more than just ordinary, daily occurrences. And for me, the impetus is actually from my Buddhist training, especially in Ch'an Buddhism, at least how I learned it.



Figure 1. Michael Zheng. *Groundbreaking*. Performance, 2 hours. 2003

Ch'an Buddhism, as I understand it, took place in China, with the influence of Buddhism from India, in confluence with the Taoism rooted in China. Most of us know that the two main philosophers or thinkers of Taoism are Lao Tze and Chuang Tze.

Chuang Tze's main work has a volume called 齊物論 in Chinese. In English, it means that everything is equal. For me, that sets the tone for how I see things through the eyes of Ch'an Buddhism. Let's say you're drinking this Pu'er tea here, and I know they are drinking something else. Habitually, we will think that this Pu'er is special because it's 20 years old and that one is ordinary since I just got it from the supermarket yesterday. But if we look at it from Chuang Tze's 齊物論 perspective, it would go something like, "You're right. This one is special in this way. But that one is special in that way." That notion for me, is very, very profound.

**MB**

It strikes me that that is also related to maintaining a beginner's mind or an openness to things, and not limiting things with definitions.

**MZ**

Right. If I subscribe to the notion that everything has validity, I should not get into the habit of predetermined notions about anything. And the opposite of that kind of habitual thinking is really what you just said, "the beginner's mind", a phrase that D.T. Suzuki coined. You intentionally maintain this naïveté about anything you encounter; even with the same things you encountered yesterday, you might discover something new today.

I have a little plant in my backyard, a very beautiful plant in a blue pot. That plant ended up in the pot because it just invited itself there. When I noticed that there was one singular 'weed' in my pot, I thought, wow, this is a very special thing. So, I kept it and it's been there for eight months now. Every day, for those eight months, the first thing I did when I got up in the mornings was take a picture of that plant. I don't know where I'm going with this idea or this habit, but it's going.

**MB**

I want to touch on this dynamic of using habit—but also disrupting habit—with the idea of maintaining the beginner's mind, while resisting falling into the mindset of habituation. I think the opposite of habit, in a way, is chance.

I want to talk about your recent photos and drawings, in terms of a practical application of chance. There's a way in which I think the drawings, particularly, rely on



Figure 2. The Weed 3-28-2023.

chance and habit, through executing repetitions that you're not totally in control of. And I also think that the photographs have an element of that too. Particularly, maybe this series that you're working on photographing this plant.

**MZ**

I'll use "Draw a line and follow it #1" as an example. On the top of the paper, there is some kind of a pink streak, that leaked from a wash on the previous page. Normally, I would toss it. But for this one I thought, let's see what I can do with it. So, what I did was, I traced the edge of the stain. Then, I decided to come back and copy the line just drawn. Then I came back and copied that line in turn. Every time I was copying, I tried to be as faithful as possible to copy the nuances of the twists and turns of the previous line. And if there was a break, say my muscle twitched, or the ink dried up, and it produced some variation, I'd copy that as well. Over time, it amplifies these tendencies. You see that the last line is drastically different than the first line.

The concept is to relinquish the expectation of a particular final image. To achieve that, I made one simple rule for myself: copy the previous line. That's the habitual



Figure 3. The Weed 9-8-2023.

part of it. And the chance part is the variations introduced by accidents.

**MB**

You suffered some retinal damage due to the "Groundbreaking" performance, which also influences your inability to draw straight lines.

**MZ**

It's very, very paradoxical, in that, no matter how hard I try, I cannot draw straight lines because my eyes don't see straight lines. So, even if I use a ruler to draw an actual straight line, as soon as I take the ruler away, it's curved.

**MB**

I'm interested in the relationship between this recent series of line drawings and landscape, particularly in a traditional Chinese landscape.

**MZ**

"Wu Wei Landscape #1", which looks like a Chinese landscape painting, is one of the drawings in the series that we just spoke about, except that it is only a portion

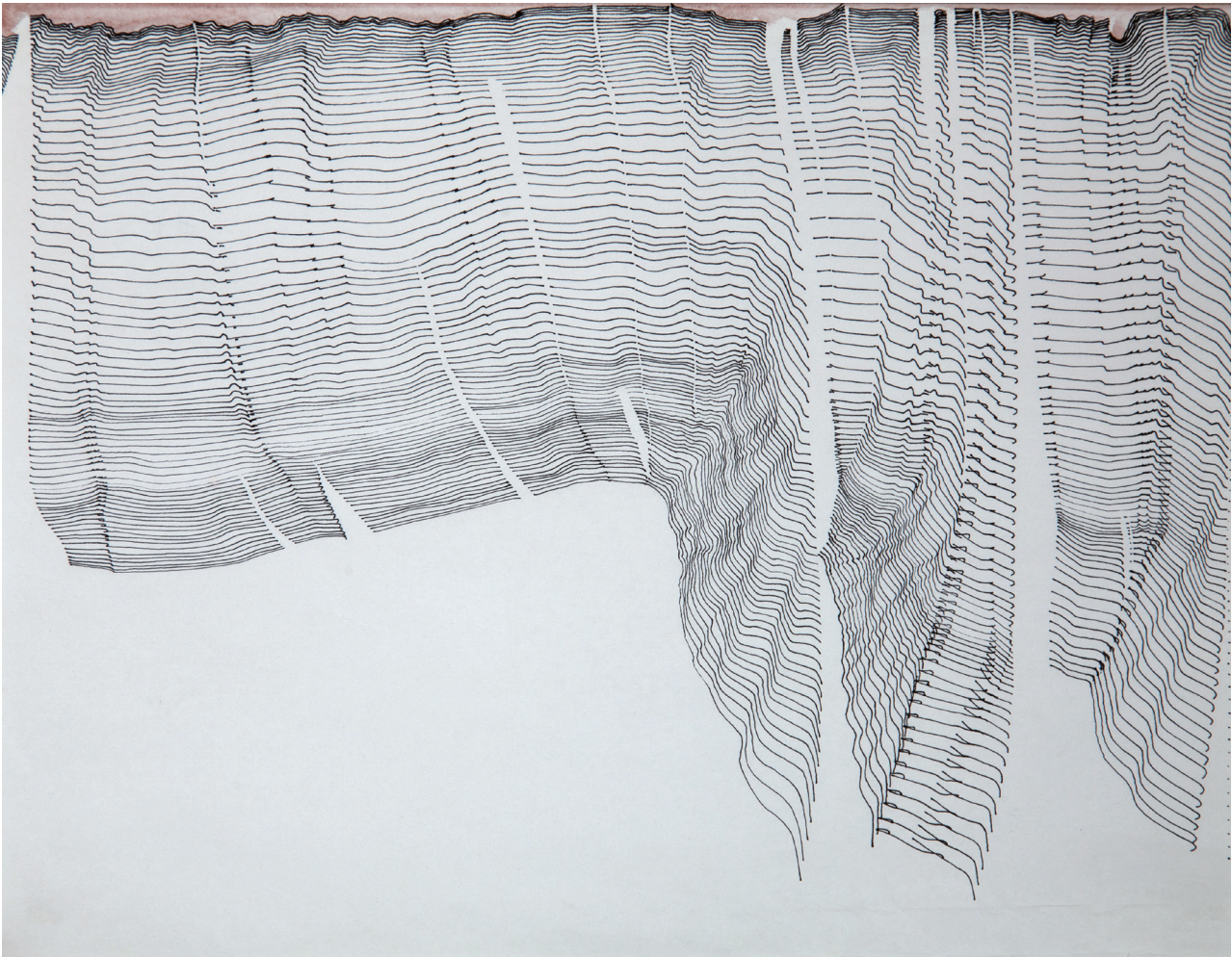


Figure 4. Michael Zheng. *Draw a line and follow it #1*. Ball-tipped pen and ink on paper, 11"×8.5", 2020.

cropped from an original drawing that I had done using the method in “Draw a line and follow it”. I noticed that one part of the larger drawing somehow felt like a Chinese landscape painting. So, I intentionally framed it in format of a Chinese landscape painting. Of course, it’s got nothing to do with traditional Chinese landscape painting. That’s why I call it “Wu Wei landscape” ( 無為山水畫 ). Even though I didn’t intend to draw the original drawing as a landscape, by framing a portion of it this way, suddenly it has an uncanny semblance to traditional Chinese painting, including the colors, which coincide with the colors used in a typical style of Chinese landscape painting called 青綠山水畫 or in English “Blue green landscape painting on silk”. Since my original drawing was done on a wood panel, the wood grain now looks like the silk texture. I learned that framing the same drawing in different ways, can engender entirely different feelings and effects. This particular reframing is possible because the original drawing is done painstakingly, with a fine ball-tipped pen,

dense and packed with formal nuances. It lends itself naturally to enlargement, cropping and re-contextualization.

This experiment made me realize how framing affects our perception, and has led me to investigate how mediation affects perception. I’m incorporating other mediums that have since become available including computer printing, scanning, etc. In some ways, it loops back to my interest in perception, a main focus in my last show, “A Tree is a Tree”, at 500 Capp Street. I’m excited about where it’s going and have made several pieces of work so far.

This is a perfect example to answer your previous question about the role chance plays in my work.

**MB**

Speaking of landscape, I want to talk about your photographs. Because those are the most intentional direct landscapes – they are landscape photographs. How did you start taking these pictures?

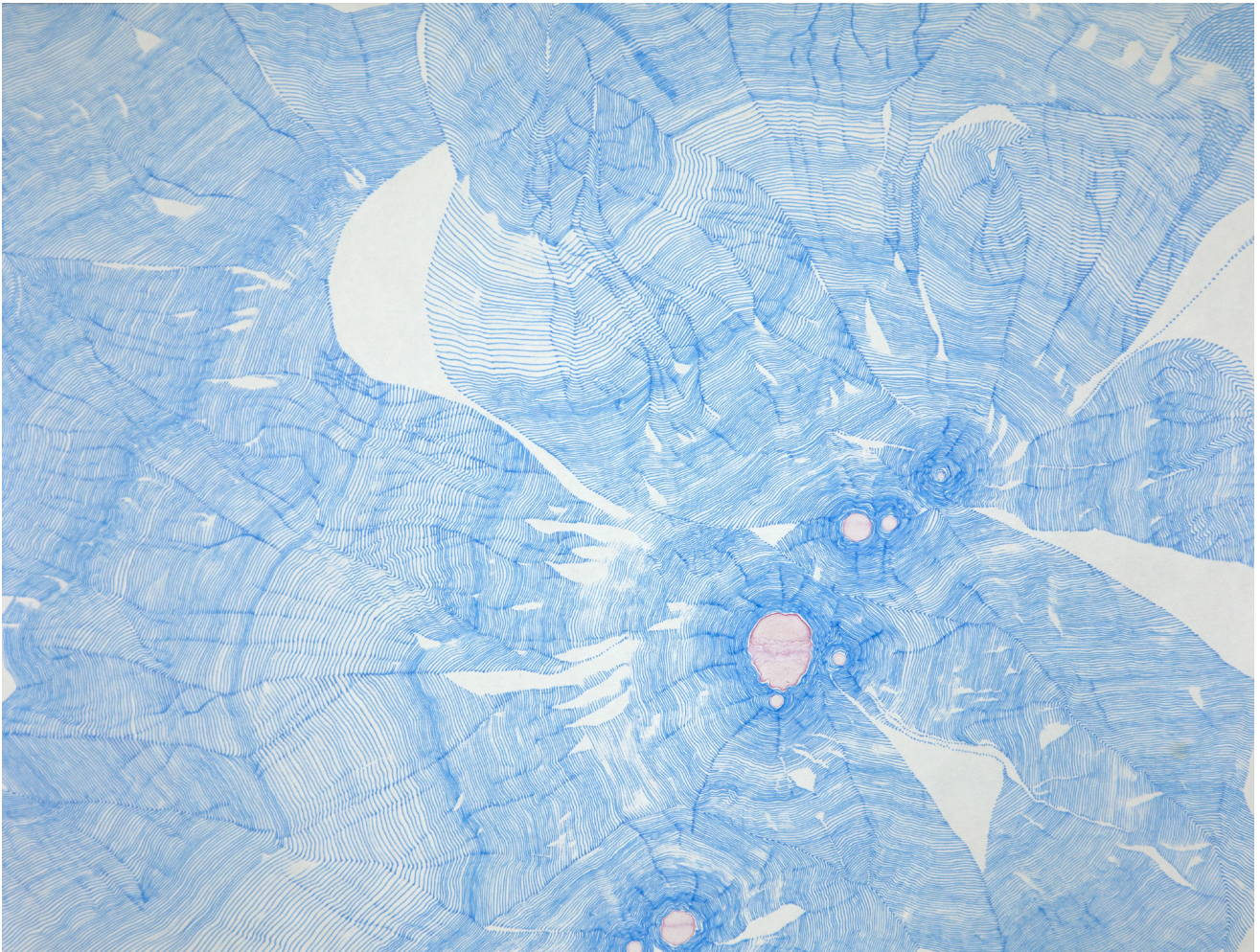


Figure 5. Michael Zheng. *Draw a line and follow it #13*. starting from the randomly dripped pink ink stains on the paper, ball-tipped pen and ink on paper, 12"×9", 2020.

**MZ**

My main daily activity involves walking and looking for things. When I find things, I record them. So that is how I came to what you refer to as my photography work. It's mostly about where I walked to, and what I encountered. From that perspective, it's mostly little events, little scenes from daily life. But this goes back to what we talked about earlier. Why do I take those pictures? It is because I feel like this particular imagery has some transcendent quality. That motivates me to see if I can frame it in a particular way. Will there be poetry to it?

"Red Shirt on the Rabbit Road Trail", for example, is a direct record of one of the sights I saw on a hike in New Mexico. At the head of a trail, I happened upon this sight of a crimson red shirt on a stump. But there is another part of the same shirt that has fallen, probably a long time ago, because it's already covered with dirt. That intrigued me. It conjured up many stories in my imagination. What happened to the owner of this red shirt? How long has it been here? So on, so forth. There is an element of time,

and narrative in there. And that's the kind of thing that compels me to pay attention and to record it.

**MB**

I think photography is all about narratives and stories, about achieving those stories through framing by taking your view of life and selecting a small square of the world to take a picture of. You told me when we spoke on the phone that photography was a new thing for you. But I was wondering if your practice isn't already about framing life as art in these small ways, about taking these moments and reframing them.

**MZ**

If the definition of photography can include just framing life in particular ways, then yes, I agree one-hundred-per-cent that I might have been making 'photography-based' work for a long time! Because that's really how I do other works as well, including the performances.

I did a performance called "Artist for Hire", where I



Figure 6. Michael Zheng. *Draw a Line and Follow It*. Starting with nail holes and smudges already on the wall, markers on the wall, 43”x80”, 2021.



Figure 7. David's Hand, Site-specific installation with a light box, part of the exhibition “A Tree is A Tree” at 500 Capp Street in San Francisco, 8.5”x12”, 2022.

offered myself for hire to anybody. ‘Hire’ is not accurate, because I wasn’t paid. But in my mind, I know conceptually, the cost to them is that they have to live with me for 24 hours. For one particular episode in Krakow, Poland, a young, new mother, who had a four-week-old child, hired me.

She hadn’t wanted to have the child, but the father had said: “Well, it’s already here. Let’s have it.” But as soon as they decided to keep the child, the father disappeared. So, she ended up with a child she didn’t want, and had to take care of it full-time. That was when she hired me.

So, I asked her, ‘What do you want me to do?’ She said, ‘I just want you to care for the baby and me for one day.’

In the picture documenting the performance, I’m taking the baby for a stroll. They lived on the fourth floor, which was a major maneuver for me, because after I exited the elevator, there were three steps down to get to the street. To hold this baby in the stroller and go up and down three steps was a major effort. But that young lady had to do it daily, multiple times.

Anyway, the modus operandi for this kind of work is really what you refer to as ‘framing life’, taking an actual slice of life and calling it art. It doesn’t get more mundane than walking a stroller. But if you know how it came about, it can be intriguing.

### MB

It makes me think about the political aspect of labor. You’re reproducing that structure, but you’re also subverting it. You’re saying that if art can be work, work can also be art – it can be an artwork.

### MZ

I think there’s much truth in that. Probably it’s in my subconscious, because I struggled to call it ‘Artist for hire’. After all, I wasn’t paid. But I was paid because I got to do my work. In that way, I was rewarded. The people who hired me didn’t seem to have to pay me anything, but they had to bear the cost of living with me as a stranger. What if I was annoying to them? How we transcend those kinds of contractual, daily occurrences into something that can be intriguing, is the kind of thing that interests me.

### MB

I’m sure you annoyed some of these people [laughs]. But I think in the case of your work with the young mother, there’s a way in which your action also gave some value back to her life and what she’s doing every day. It’s saying that her life is already a work of art.



Figure 8. Michael Zheng. *Artist for Hire*. Krakow episode, performance, 2020.

**MZ**

In fact, she did tell me afterwards that it was therapeutic for her to watch a man doing all the care-taking for one day, something that she was doing all the time.

**MB**

Some of your other performances are a little more antagonistic. I'm thinking particularly of your performance at SFMOMA, "Blocking Rauschenberg". Can you describe it?

**MZ**

I stood very close to a small photograph by Rauschenberg, so close that I blocked it for the entire day. I was the first person to arrive and the last to leave. So, for the entire day, nobody could see it. And of course, the guard gave me a hard time. But my craft for that piece was to do whatever I needed to buy time, so that I could stay there for the entire day. And I succeeded. So that was very antagonistic. But ironically, for this very confrontational work, I have to rely on my meditation

practice, because I have to stand there for the entire day without a break.

There are two layers to it. One is my homage to Rauschenberg for the piece he did, "Erased De Kooning". Secondly, my interest was in disrupting the expectation that when we go to a museum, we know we'll see art, that whatever is on the wall or the floor is art. If I block this thing you call art, what are you getting out of it? Can the blocking be considered art or is it not interesting enough? Or does it contain enough information and richness to intrigue you to think and feel those feelings as you might have when you see some 'actual' artwork there?

**MB**

I think part of what you're disrupting with a piece like this also, is the passive engagement that many people have with art. People go, briefly look at as many things as possible, and then they leave. I think the best experience of this performance for me, as a viewer, would be if I had come, to the museum that day on a



Figure 9. Michael Zheng. *Red Shirt on Rabbit Road Trail*. Digital print, 2021.



Figure 10. Michael Zheng. *Wu Wei Landscape #1*. Mixed media, content dimensions: 13"×43 1/2", Framed dimensions: 16"×59", 2023.



Figure 11. Michael Zheng. *Wu Wei Landscape #2*. Mixed media, content dimensions: 13"×43 1/2", Framed dimensions: 16"×59", 2023.



Figure 12. Michael Zheng. *Blocking Rauschenberg*. Performance at SFMOMA, one museum day, December 3, 2010.

mission to see that particular Rauschenberg photograph, because it would force me to have the furthest thing from a passive experience. It reminds people that they should engage with art on a conscious level.

I prefer to avoid the idea that people can engage with art passively. And your art is a great example of art that is impossible to engage with passively, because it forces me to be a participant in so many ways.

It strikes me that a certain kind of passivity is almost a core tenet of Buddhism. And maybe that's a misunderstanding born out of my naïveté about Buddhism. So, what do you think about those distinctions, specifically in relation to Buddhism, which, of course, also influences your practice?

**MZ**

From my practice and learning about Buddhism, I think that passivity is not the right word to describe the main characteristic, or even one of the characteristics, of Buddhism. It is not being passive. If there is anything that comes close, it's the 'Wu Wei' concept. It's not about

no action. You do take action, but not in a way where your subjectivity gets in the way.

For instance, to deal with the recent politically contentious situations, one can be confrontational. Or one can choose to go the opposite route. In my case, I started to make drawings.

It's not a direct method to cope with contentious situations. Still, the benefit of doing those meditative things is the cultivation of something a little more tolerant, and more stable. So that when actual, external life is contentious, I felt I was more capable of coping with it. So, on the surface, it could mean that when someone from the political right confronted me and I didn't fight back, I was being passive, right? But from a person who actually practices this thing, I don't feel so. It actually takes a lot more to stand your ground than fighting their fight. And standing your ground is a very powerful way of fighting back. And the fact that I survived living and creating art this way says something.

**MB**

It occurs to me that my perception of a lack of confrontation as being passive is a distinctly Western perspective.

I recently met a conceptual photographer, a Chilean artist, named Rodrigo Valenzuela. He said something that stood out to me that I wanted to ask you about, which is that he feels like there's been a loss of the poetic in Western art. What do you think of that?

**MZ**

I feel that is so, not just in the art, but also in the way of life. It's a big statement, so I want to take a step back and borrow your words to go into it, because you also said that the way of life here is more confrontational. From my perspective, that is very true. It becomes more apparent if you compare it to a different way of life.

In China, especially the literati, the intelligentsia, have a habit of going to nature, just like we also have a habit of going to nature. But there is a major distinction in the attitudes. In Chinese culture, there's a certain reverence toward nature. When we go out to be with nature, we want to be immersed in nature. Many people in the West have a habit of saying, let's go camping, or let's climb this mountain. In the West, we want to achieve something. Executing a plan is an achievement, but you lose the poetry. The Chinese tradition of going into



Figure 13. Robert Rauschenberg, Erased de Kooning Drawing, Image from SFMOMA website, 1953.

nature is about finding inspiration for poetry.

*Fri, Sep. 9, 2023*