In Chen Zihao’s recent oeuvre, materials such as thin, craggy rocks, metal, and minerals, or highly saturated blocks of color are inserted into the textures of abstract oil paintings placed within frames of iron, wood, copper, stainless steel, and colored acrylic. The artist calls these brightly-colored works “land art in 2.5 dimensions.” This “2.5 dimensions” is a humorous turn of phrase, as the works are not the dimensional descent of three-dimensional reality described in science fiction. Chen Zihao primarily uses oil painting to record multiple landscapes that are not present; these works are obviously different from, but still reference, land art. Chen describes the various magnificent scenes that he has experienced, and after re-awakening those memories, he uses thick brushstrokes to present geographic textures, creating Informe-style works. His images are often birds-eye views, with connecting and overlapping blocks of color, as if layering the patterns of the earth and the colors of the sky based on his own change in perspective. This new body of work will be presented in Tang Contemporary Art Bangkok’s new space.

His palette immediately brings to mind the Hard Edge paintings of Op artist Josef Albers. Two works in the exhibition use ring-shaped ornamental rocks to replace the square edges in Albers’ *Homage to the Square* compositions, creating something akin to the familiar moon gate in a Chinese garden. Albers once explained color relationships as, “Simultaneous contrast is not just a curious optical phenomenon—it is the very heart of painting.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Another purple, black and white, and red triptych piece is covered with red acrylic on the outside. Drawing on the idea of glazing from classical oil painting, Chen weakens the colors in the triptych to the illusion of black and white images, giving viewers a monochrome visual experience. In the exhibited works, the textures, formal contrasts, and immersive applications of light also reveal connections to James Turrell and other artists working with light. In Turrell’s ambitious Roden Crater, for example, he combined light and land art. This was a complex and careful way of emphasizing the subtlety of visual perception, hence this direction of artistic practice is seen as an extension of land art.

*Geometric Landscape* is a set of sculptural paintings in geometric shapes and a response to Walter de Maria’s *The Equal Area Series* (1976-1977). In addition to the formal influences, *Geometric Landscape* is also placed on the floor of the exhibition hall, imitating scenery from various landscapes in specific lights with paintings in copper frames. This body of work is different from Walter de Maria’s works, which had elements from Minimalism, Conceptual Art, and Land Art. *Geometric Landscape* brings images of land art happening at a site into a nonsite exhibition space and condenses the process of viewers imagining and transplanting outdoor spaces into indoor spaces. Robert Smithson believed, “What you are really confronted with in a nonsite is the absence of the site… What I did was go out to the fringes, pick a point in the fringes and collect some raw material… so that you have the nonsite functioning as a mirror and the site functioning as a reflection.”[[2]](#footnote-2) In the context of the exhibition, the objects determine the nature of the spaces in which they are placed. “Land art in 2.5 dimensions,” as the artist describes it, is the translation of objects and spaces. The brushstrokes and the canvas, the body and the land are parallel concepts in Chen Zihao’s works. They are related to the creative process and the spatial experience of the work.

In a globalized context, Chen extracts many landscape elements to make his work. On the surface of the canvas, he uses thick strokes of oil paint to imitate the craggy effects of Chinese ink paintings, presenting a landscape from overhead or using a multi-point perspective. In choosing the strange rocks, he rigidly adhered to traditional literati standards. The artist once mentioned that he saw a news report on Fujian businessman Cao Dewang’s experiences investing in factories in the United States. This anecdote, examined from a global perspective, gives the artist’s work a precise, realistic reference. In one of his works, Chen depicts Ohio, the place where Cao invested, viewing him as a contemporary version of “the foolish old man who removed the mountains.”

By combining painterly expressions and found objects, Chen Zihao adjusts formal language to achieve his goal. Chen is a member of a diaspora group. The artist was born in Fujian province, but he has engaged with the relationships between absorption, definition, and the plural culture and politics while living abroad. His works blur the lines between painting, sculpture, and installation, projecting visions of the future and exploring its uncertainties. Steven Nelson wrote, “Instead of merely representing the past, diaspora consciousness points to the present (and future) myths and realities.”[[3]](#footnote-3) The artist often sees the objects, such as stones, as overlapping objects that stand at the intersection of the experiences of different individuals and communities. The objects in the works are coordinates, portals as well as breaches. This understanding comes from individual experiences or memories, but it also stems from narratives of globalization and interstellar colonies, whether real or fictional. In the history of visual practice, artists in a diaspora have multiple worldviews, and they have changed modernism and later visual languages, just as the aspects of Chen’s multicultural expressions, such as knowledge and capital, have.

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1. Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Robert Smithson, “Fragments of an Interview with P.A. Norvell, April 1969,” in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972,* ed. Lucy R. Lippard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Steven Nelson, “Diaspora: Multiple Practices, Multiple Worldviews,” in *A Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945*, ed. Amelia Jones (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 314. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)