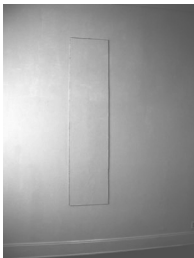


## Michael Zheng at MISSION 17

*Scott Oliver*

“The Taoist sage Chuang Tzu once dreamed he had turned into a butterfly. When he awoke, he couldn’t help but wonder whether it was he, who had dreamed of becoming a butterfly, or the butterfly, who had dreamed of becoming Chuang Tzu.” And so I was introduced, by way of an email announcement, to *As The Butterfly Said To Chuang Tzu*, Michael Zheng’s sparse exhibition at MISSION 17. As you might suspect the story about Chuang Tzu is not the literal subject matter of Zheng’s artwork but a philosophical departure point (a frame of reference) for inquiry into the nature of human perception. All of this, I gathered, before ever stepping foot in the gallery.

I only mention it because with *As The Butterfly Said...* Zheng has articulated his interest in how our experiences (what we take as reality) are largely of our own construction. As I entered the gallery I was already imagining, as Chuang Tzu did, a less certain self. It sounds rather mystical, but Zheng’s approach is surprisingly concrete—responding to the physical attributes of the gallery and using its rarefied environment to raise questions about our relationship to the material world.



For “Big I,” the show’s only titled piece, Zheng cut a long, vertical rectangle into the gallery’s wall and pulled the freed chunk of sheet rock a half inch into the space. The resulting shadow line and raw gypsum edge delineate the boundary between two and three dimensions, between wall and art or painting and sculpture, yet we are always aware that what we are looking at is essentially the wall. Or has it become something else? In this way Zheng explores the limits of the gallery as a context for art and continually asks how one’s experience of art is shaped by it’s framing. This inquiry extends both to physical

frames (architecture) and mental ones (our expectations and assumptions). It is the space between these—the “gap” suggested by Duchamp—where Zheng’s work really lives and where the question of framing becomes most fertile—in the mind of the viewer.



Zheng’s spare visual sensibility and preoccupation with the phenomenological possibilities of the gallery space are well suited to creating openings for the viewer’s subjectivity. As *The Butterfly Said...* is almost pedagogical in this respect. Zheng uses a variety of strategies to engage and challenge his viewers, and to provide opportunities to enter the work. Take the seedling piece for instance (perhaps the show’s most accessible). At the far end of the gallery, near the windows, is a table with a watering can and three small, labeled pots, each with a seedling. A sign nearby instructs visitors to water the plants if the soil is dry. As they do they are to utter encouraging words to the plant labeled “Encourage,” discouraging words to the plant labeled “Discourage,” and nothing to the plant labeled “Neutral.” When I visited “Neutral” had grown tallest and “Encourage” was the runt. I was being asked to reconcile belief and empirical evidence. The best I could do was recall something I’d read about water molecules being altered by meditation.

The other works in the show are less immediate—their effects more gradual. As *The Butterfly Said...* definitely benefits from (and merits) taking one’s time, as I did, to wonder about the set of old blinds hanging on the gallery’s south wall, or the incongruous plywood column, or be confused by the distorted space of the Mylar cylinders collected in a corner, or catch on the disembodied sound of a passing motorcycle. All of these in one way or another, point back to the gallery itself, and so I began to notice details native to the space—how light entered the room, blemishes in the wall, the placement of electrical outlets, repairs to the wood floor, inconsistencies in the trim work along the ceiling and so on—a heightened sense of awareness that lingered with me long after I left the building.

Scott Oliver is the co-initiator of the *Shotgun Review*, a web publication that includes reviews of events, projects and exhibitions in the San Francisco Bay Area.

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