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## NEWS FROM OUR PARTNERS

### Art, communication, and science intersect in Cheung's environmental work, which explores the human-nature relationship

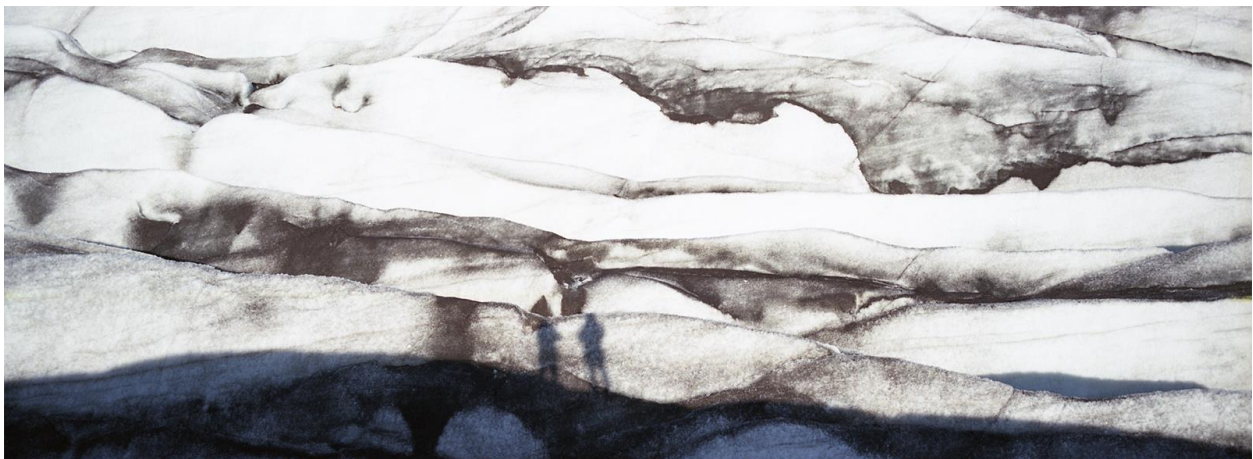
Lily Robinson

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*This artist profile is one in an ongoing series highlighting the role creative work plays in connecting people with nature and inspiring a culture of stewardship. If you are an artist whose work is inspired by nature and would like to be featured in a future ILCN newsletter, please reach out to [lrobinson@lincolninst.edu](mailto:lrobinson@lincolninst.edu). We will accept visual fine art, photography, poetry, personal essays, music, and more.*

Every character in the Chinese writing system is a picture that tells a story. The word “field” is a grid, like the aerial view of a rice paddy. “Image” is a box with that same grid within it. Nature, art, and perspective are all intrinsic to the language. This interconnection is at the root of Joanne Cheung's work as an independent artist. Through photography, she explores human relationships with nature and challenges the objectivity of the medium.

View Cheung's full portfolio and learn more about her past work at [joannekcheung.com](http://joannekcheung.com)



*Svínafellsjökull, June 10, 2017, 5:56:31 PM GMT. Credit: Joanne Cheung.*

Cheung is a Chinese American artist based in Berkeley, California, who works across disciplines, including photography, videography, design, poetry, and science. The influence of nature and landscapes is woven throughout her work, as well as the language and scientific concepts that help us understand them.

People and nature are often portrayed as separate, even in competition with each other. When she focuses her lens on the world around her, Cheung asks herself if there is a way to blur that line so that humans are viewed in relation with nature.



*Vatnajökull, June 10, 2017, 3:24:30 PM GMT. Credit: Joanne Cheung.*

In 2014, the Icelandic glacier, Okjökull, became the first in the nation to lose its classification to climate change. To be a glacier, a body of ice must be heavy enough [to move under its own weight](#). When it becomes too thin to do so, it dies. A warming climate diminished Okjökull to this point and it was declared dead in 2014. “It was a moment of grief, culturally,” said Cheung.

But it also made her wonder how her work could help people visualize gradual, large-scale change and stimulate action. Photography is a way of memorializing the past, of capturing the moments that are most worth remembering and pulling them out of their place in time to frame and pass on. This, she said, can help society recognize what it is missing. She hoped photography and videography could help shape the narrative of a changing world.

After reading his name in a news article, she reached out to Magnus Hallgrímsson, then the vice president of the Iceland Glaciological Society (IGS). In 2016, she traveled to Svínafellsjökull, an outlet glacier in the Skaftafell Nature Reserve in Iceland and worked alongside glaciologists from the IGS as she developed a collection of [360-degree videos](#) and photos of the glacier.

Capturing nature, and landscapes in particular, presents a unique challenge. Often, the most breathtaking views as seen through the human eye appear small and mundane in a photograph. Cheung sees this as a metaphor for humans’ misunderstanding of their own power over nature. “There is a certain hubris in thinking we can capture everything,” she said.

Even the best photography is curated. Like any art, it is a representation of something faceted and open to interpretation. A picture of a glacier shows only what is visible, though most of its mass is below the surface. Her photos could not detect what the glaciologists she was working beside did through testing and research. But, even to them, the images were interesting. Some of the scientists rarely looked at the

glaciers. They saw them represented as numbers and data on a computer screen rather than as the haunting layers of light and shadow that stretch from frame to frame in Cheung's pictures and that viewers can navigate independently in her videos.

The glaciologists could share the story of what was happening to the ice forms beneath the surface as they melted, moved, and—sometimes—ceased to move. Cheung reminded people that even major damage is not always clearly visible on the surface.

Together, Cheung and her colleagues created a more complete picture of the landscape—and its evolution under human-driven climate change—than either would have alone. Finding these different ways of understanding and appreciating what is being protected through conservation measures, both by portraying existing beauty and telling the story of invisible change, is part of what drives her.



*Vatnajökull, June 10, 2017, 4:02:24 PM GMT. Credit: Joanne Cheung.*

Having immigrated to the United States when she was 10, Cheung learned to embrace the discomfort of the unfamiliar and the experience has been an asset to her work. It makes her more curious and eager to explore new disciplines. She would like to see others do more of this, as she often sees experts hesitate to collaborate outside of their field.

Issues as large and complex as climate change will take new ways of understanding, storytelling, and memorializing that no one industry has the capacity to develop on its own. Artists like Cheung, who explore nuanced ways of communicating, play an important role in uniting people across skillsets.

When Okjökull lost its classification as a glacier, it also lost part of its name. “Jökull” translates directly to “glacier” in Icelandic, so the landform became “Ok”. The linguistic change is a reminder of the deep interconnection between culture, land, and human ways of knowing, the same connection that Cheung identified in the Chinese language early on in her career and continues to explore, share, and celebrate through her work today.

**More about the artist:**



Joanne Cheung lives in Berkeley, California, where she makes art, runs a design and research collective, and lectures at the University of California, Berkeley. She has collaborated on participatory art projects with the Icelandic Glaciological Society, Harvard Earth and Planetary Sciences Visualization Lab, Harvard Office of Sustainability, and Dartmouth Life Sciences Center. She has been an artist-in-residence at the Icelandic Association of Visual Artists and Brooklyn Information & Culture. Her work has been exhibited

internationally and featured in *Wallpaper*, *Wired*, and the *New York Times Magazine*.

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