



## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Director of External Relations, Jennifer Greim, [jgreim@thomascole.org](mailto:jgreim@thomascole.org)

### **“SHI GUORUI: Ab/Sense-Pre/Sense” Opens at Thomas Cole National Historic Site**

**Exhibition Unveils Large-Scale Landscape Photographs by Acclaimed Contemporary Artist Shi Guorui, Created by Converting 20-Foot Box Truck into Camera Obscura**

### **Photographs Pay Homage to Thomas Cole (1801-1848), Founder of American Landscape Painting**

Catskill, NY – September 23, 2019 – A solo exhibition of new work by acclaimed contemporary artist Shi Guorui opened yesterday at the Thomas Cole National Historic Site. The show will be on view through December 1, 2019, in the 1815 Main House of the historic site, where artist Thomas Cole lived and worked. The exhibition debuts new giant landscape photographs, created using a camera obscura, that pay homage to the landscapes and legacy of Thomas Cole (1801-1848), founder of America’s first major art movement, now known as the Hudson River School of painting.

Shi Guorui is internationally recognized for his giant camera obscura photographs. His projects have included panoramic images of the Great Wall of China, Shanghai, Hong Kong, New York’s Times Square, and Mount Everest. His work has been featured in exhibitions at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the de Young Museum in San Francisco, The Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, TX, and the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago, among other museums in North America, Europe, and Asia. He is represented by 10 Chancery Lane Gallery in Hong Kong. Originally based in Beijing, China, Shi Guorui now has a studio and home in Catskill, New York.



*SHI GUORUI: Ab/Sense-Pre/Sense* installation view © Peter Aaron/OTTO

To create the artwork for the exhibition, Shi Guorui has traced Cole's own footsteps into the landscape and built walk-in camera obscuras on location in order to make direct, extended, time-lapse exposures of these places in nature today. For the project, Shi Guorui has converted a 20-foot box truck into a camera obscura and built 20-foot-wide pinhole camera tents within the landscape to photograph iconic sites in New York's Catskill Mountains, such as Catskill Creek and Kaaterskill Falls. These sites are made accessible through the Hudson River School Art Trail, an innovative outdoor program created by the Thomas Cole Site that connects visitors with the places in nature that Thomas Cole painted.

The box truck and tent camera obscuras (Latin for "dark room") that Shi Guorui constructs operate like giant cameras without a lens. Light enters the enclosed space through a tiny pinhole that projects a direct image onto light-sensitive photographic paper. The artist remains inside the camera during the entire exposure, which lasts hours or even days. The resulting unique gelatin silver print has a depth of field that the human eye could not otherwise register and see on its own. Shi Guorui is interested in how they are "faithful portraits of pure light and time" and emphasize the timelessness and sweeping expanse of each place. His contemporary images draw upon both ancient Chinese traditions and American landscape painting traditions, reflecting Cole's legacy and the natural landscape today.

Thomas Cole owned a small camera obscura, and one is on view in the artist's 1839 Old Studio. Cole used a small camera obscura as a tool to frame the landscape and define the composition for his paintings and in letters in 1840 and 1844 writes about his hope for the new invention of photography. Shi Guorui uses this ancient optical process to create monumental landscape panoramas. He chose this process to slow down time as a direct response to the frenetic pace of contemporary China and in contrast to our digital moment, where hundreds of millions of images are instantly uploaded to social media every day. In his slowed-down technique, only that which is not fleeting, that which endures over time, can be seen.

Shi Guorui, who established his own studio in Catskill, NY, is inspired not only by Cole's paintings but also by Cole's writing, including his proto-environmentalist work, *Essay on American Scenery* (1836), and the unique history of this landscape. The photographic interpretations respond as much to the literal light, landscapes, and objects refracted through the lens, as they do to memory and the passage of time. Shi Guorui continued creating new work in the landscape through the early summer as preparations for the exhibition unfolded. In addition to the large-scale photographs, the artist has converted one of the rooms in the historic house into a camera obscura and created a new sound artwork and temporal light performance for the occasion of the opening of the exhibition.



Artist, Shi Guorui in his darkroom, Catskill, NY, June 2019. Photo by Felix Chan

The exhibition is curated by Kate Menconeri, Director of Exhibitions & Collections and Curator at the Thomas Cole National Historic Site. A full-color print catalogue accompanies the exhibition and includes an exclusive interview with the artist. The catalogue is available for purchase both at the historic site and at [www.thomascole.org](http://www.thomascole.org).

The new series of photographs that debuts at the Cole Site is in direct conversation with Cole's paintings. It is part of the annual series "OPEN HOUSE: Contemporary Art in Conversation with Cole."

"This exhibition explores landscape, history, and art in a cross-cultural exchange," said Kate Menconeri, Curator of the Thomas Cole National Historic Site. "It is the first time an artist from China is presenting work within the American artist's home. In doing so, Shi Guorui connects two landscape traditions that each redefined how a nation was seen and offer a chance to consider our relationship to the natural world today."

"This ambitious and dynamic photographic project offers new ways to see and consider the landscapes that inspired Thomas Cole," said Elizabeth B. Jacks, Executive Director of the Thomas Cole National Historic Site. "Guorui is not only connecting 1825 with 2019 but also the traditions of landscape art from ancient China to contemporary America."

"Time flies and things change," said Shi Guorui. "All the way through history natural scenery and constructions remain, while relevant people disappear. . . . Living in the present, how can we recapture and reproduce historical thoughts, opinions, feelings, or memories by means of photography? And what new experiences and feelings can we come up with during the process of recapture and reproduction?"

### **Ongoing Exhibitions in the Thomas Cole Site's 1815 Main House**

+ *The Parlors*, an immersive experience with the artist's own decorative painting on the walls and multimedia installations that convey his passionate concern for the environment.

+ *Mind Upon Nature: Thomas Cole's Creative Process*, an exhibition featuring Cole's original paintings, sketches, palettes, and other unique objects.

### **Ongoing Exhibition in the Thomas Cole-designed New Studio**

+ *Thomas Cole's Refrain: The Paintings of Catskill Creek* (through November 3), an exhibition exploring, for the first time as a series, Cole's iconic Catskill Creek landscapes, which were painted from 1827 to 1845 and are the most sustained sequence of landscapes he ever made.

### **The Thomas Cole National Historic Site**

The Thomas Cole National Historic Site is an international destination presenting the original home and studios of Thomas Cole, the founder of the Hudson River School of painting, the nation's first major art movement. Located in the Hudson Valley, the site includes the 1815 Main House; Cole's 1839 Old Studio; the recently reconstructed New Studio building; and panoramic views of the Catskill Mountains. It is a National Historic Landmark and an affiliated area of the National Park System. The Thomas Cole Site's

activities include guided and self-guided tours, special exhibitions of both 19<sup>th</sup>-century and contemporary art, printed publications, lectures, extensive online programs, activities for school groups, the Cole Fellowship program, free community events, and innovative public programs such as the Hudson River School Art Trail—a map and website that enable people to visit the places in nature that Cole painted – and the Hudson River Skywalk – a new walkway connecting the Thomas Cole Site with Frederic Church’s Olana over the Hudson River. The goal of all programs at the Thomas Cole Site is to enable visitors to find meaning and inspiration in Thomas Cole’s life and work. The themes that Cole explored in his art and writings—such as landscape preservation and our conception of nature as a restorative power—are both historic and timely, providing the opportunity to connect to audiences with insights that are highly relevant to their own lives.

### **Visitor Information**

The Thomas Cole National Historic Site is open Tuesday through Sunday from June to November 3 and Friday through Sunday from November 8 through December 1. Hours vary by season. For details see: [www.thomascole.org/visit](http://www.thomascole.org/visit). Keep in touch on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter at @thomascolesite.

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