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Philip Martin Gallery

RESEARCH AND



BY HG MASTERS

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Erosion Machine No. 4, 1969. Plexiglas, metal racks and fittings, plastic, water pump, LED lights, black light, pebbles, four erosion rocks, and wood base, 38.1 x 63.5 x 22.86 cm. All images courtesy the artist and Philip Martin Gallery, Los Angeles.

DEVELOPMENT

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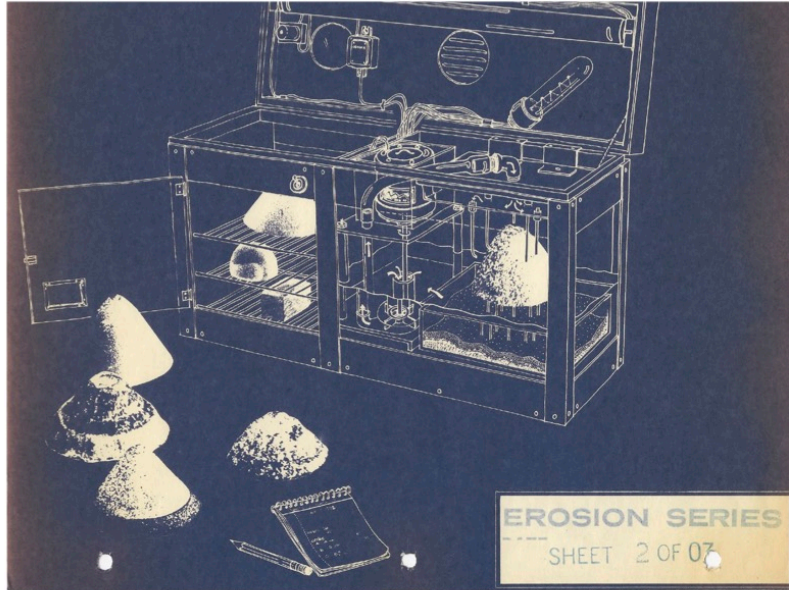
In 1969, the John Doe Co. of Santa Monica, California, released the first in its line of “nature products”: *Erosion Machine*, a yellow, hi-tech-looking, microwave-size appliance. A switch on its exterior activates a pump inside one of its two chambers, and, under the rays of a black light, a pressurized stream of water wears down a “human rock”—a pile of natural sediment mixed with plastic chips—in an artificial simulation of water’s sculptural effects on a solid mass. According to the device’s inventor and the company’s founder, artist Carl Cheng, the idea behind this machine was to “model nature, its processes and effects for a future environment that may be completely made by humans.” In brochures of the time, John Doe Co. advertised a range of other products in development, from an *Ecological Systems Comparator* to a *Table Model Specimen Viewer*, and a *163 Early Warning System* that responded to weather reports with an “integral dual projection . . . with audio synchronization.” Three years later, John Doe Co. debuted its venus flytrap cultivator, *Supply & Demand* (1972), a plexiglass-encased, humidity-regulated bed of earth with plants being fed insects through a tube; resembling a hi-fi stereo system, it sits on a pedestal topped with artificial grass.

When Cheng began producing these devices in the late 1960s, he was already aware of the many ways in which *Homo sapiens* were inexorably transforming the Earth—from a growing human population to the invention of disposable plastics, nuclear energy, and the use of nitrogen fertilizer. At the time, new technologies were not seen as antithetical to environmentalism. Stewart Brand’s alternative magazine *The Whole Earth Catalogue*, for instance, which launched in 1968 with an image of the Earth seen from space on its cover, sold Hewlett Packard calculators alongside books on tantric art, organic gardening, solar energy, and ecological systems. It wasn’t until decades later, in 2000, that atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen would propose that the mid-20th century had marked the dawn of a new epoch in which traces of human civilization were permanently imprinted on the Earth—what Crutzen declared the Anthropocene. While many alternative dates



Supply & Demand, 1972, venus flytraps, insects, plastic case, humidifier, wiring, grass, wood pedestal, and grow lamps, 119.38 × 60.96 × 47.24 cm.

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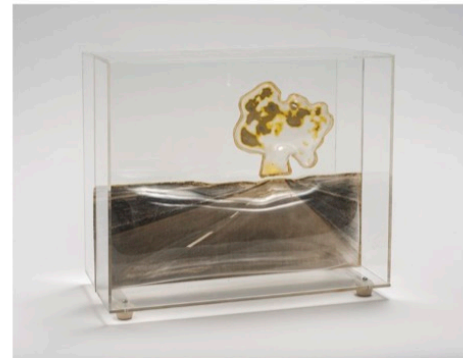


Blueprint for *Erosion Machine*, 1969.

have since been proposed for the beginning of the Anthropocene and what constitutes its hallmarks (from the changes in carbon-dioxide levels dating back to the 17th century, to the 19th-century industrial revolution and the 1945 Trinity Atomic Test), John Doe Co. was already producing machines for an era when the distinction between humans and nature had collapsed.

By the time of the social upheavals and counterculture of the late 1960s, California had undergone decades of rapid transformation fueled by the growth of high-tech industries. Born in 1942, Cheng witnessed the region's changes, growing up in the San Fernando Valley, just north of Los Angeles, as what was originally farmland became sprawling suburbs that housed workers at the new Hollywood studios in Burbank and factories like that of the Lockheed Aircraft Corporation, which produced the P-38 Lightning fighters in World War II and, later, high-tech planes for the Cold War. Cheng's explanation for how he became a company himself is that his accountant advised him, from a tax perspective, to incorporate as a business. It also helped, he realized, when he wrote to companies asking for material samples; they wouldn't reply to him as artist but they would if the request came on company letterhead. Cheng chose the name for its wry humor—"John Doe" is the generic male name used in the US for an unknown person or someone whose identity is intentionally concealed—as well as in a tribute to the many anonymous artists and artisans throughout history whose true identities remain unknown. But this corporate moniker also served another purpose, as a para-fictional artistic identity amid a surge of anti-Asian American sentiment during the American war in Vietnam.

While the aerospace industries were fueling California's economic rise and Hollywood pushed innovation in film, the fine arts lagged behind. Cheng had started out studying painting in 1958 at the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA) but after seeing fellow students in the workshop designing the interior of an



Nowhere Road, 1968, film, molded plastic, and Plexiglas, 25 × 30 × 15 cm.

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Emergency Nature Supply Kit (E.N. Supply, No. 271-OJ), 1971, polyester resin, water, green patch of grass, electronic bird sounds generated from speaker, battery, and film, 30.48 x 30.48 x 30.48 cm.

airplane, he switched to industrial design. At the time, there was no photography in the fine arts program; it was housed in the design department until Robert Heinecken, who later became known for his camera-less photographs (or “paraphotographs”) using images from commercial media, brought it into the fine arts school. Cheng, together with his friend Pat O’Neill (later an experimental filmmaker) ended up being among the first graduates working with photography, experimenting with enlargers, solarization, and different printing techniques.

Cheng’s rejection of the more traditional media of painting in favor of industrial design and photography was also a reaction to a teacher whom he felt had exoticized his work because he was Asian American. Throughout his career, he continued to recoil whenever someone would describe his work as “Zen” or “Taoist.” As he has recollected in various interviews, growing up in one of only a few Chinese families in the neighborhood of Van Nuys, Cheng experienced “pre-sixties, racist America,” where “everything was wrapped around basic White male entitlements.” By the time Cheng was attending university in the 1960s, the civil rights and antiwar movements had exploded the fault lines in United States society. “In the sixties, in college, I was part of everything that was rebelling against that,” he told writer Richard Whittaker in 2002. “I very much supported the Black movement.”

When Cheng returned to UCLA for a graduate degree in 1967, he and his classmates were caught up in anti-war demonstrations, which they would attend and photograph—leading to, at one point, the FBI raiding the fine arts department and seizing rolls of film. At the same time, Cheng found a way to combine his interest in new materials like plastic and photography by molding shapes that he merged with images. One of the first of these experiments, *Nowhere Road* (1968) is a shallow plexiglass box that contains a black-and-white photograph of a two-lane highway through the desert; where the mythical American “open road” meets the horizon, there is a massive explosion, reflecting a generational pessimism and anger about the war in Vietnam. This work along with two others—*Sculpture for Stereo Viewers* (1968), showing a pair of men holding a bulbous bundle of balloons; and *U.N. of C.*, (1967), a three-dimensional riff on the California state flag with two fornicating bears—were later featured at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in the 1970 show organized by Peter Bunnell, “Photography



View of the artist's rooftop nature laboratory with Emergency Nature Supply Kit (E.N. Supply, No. 271-OJ) (1971) among the cacti.

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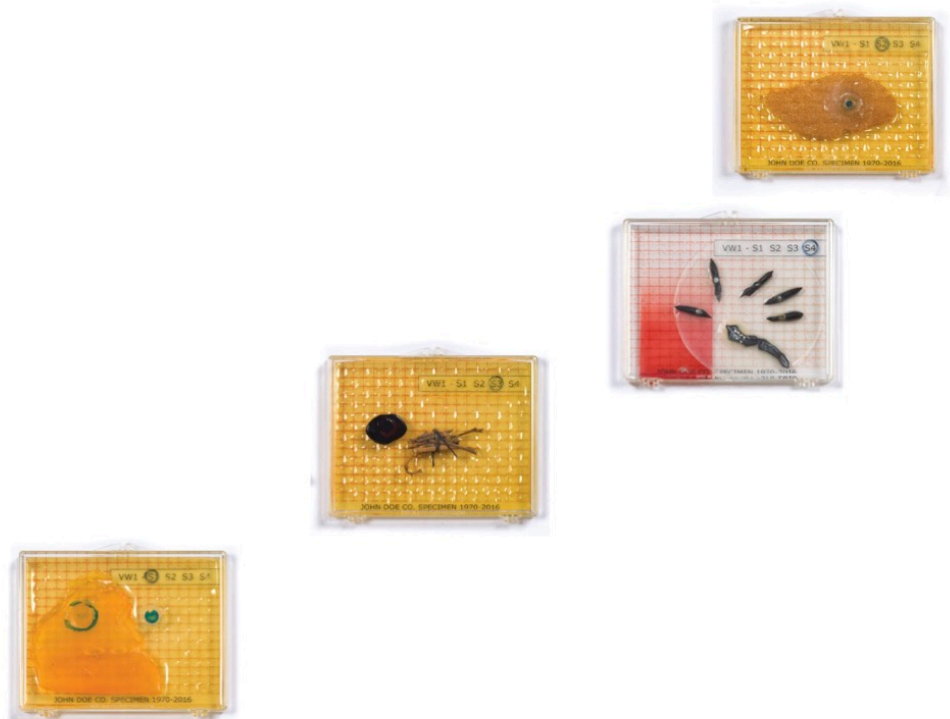
into Sculpture,” which became a landmark exhibition for highlighting new approaches to the media. But Cheng didn’t go to the opening. Instead, he and his partner, the artist Felice Mataré, had already left on a two-year trip to Japan, Malaysia, Indonesia, and India. Cheng told Whittaker in 2002: “If I’d wanted to be a one-idea career artist, I’d have stayed with that, but I was more interested in a ‘research and development’ attitude toward art. I’m always experimenting and doing things and moving on.”

The John Doe Co. identity suited Cheng’s approach to testing and experimenting before releasing artworks that were more like products than single, unique artworks. In his studio, he set up what he called a rooftop laboratory, where he exposed plants, rocks, and sediment to the elements. The company also created items that responded to the new needs of a hyper-technological society. While in Osaka, Cheng was shocked by the metro system, which was like a vast underground city without any natural elements. From that, he developed John Doe Co.’s *Emergency Nature Supply Kit (E.N. Supply, No. 271-OJ)* (1971), a pyramidal, leather trimmed hand-held luggage piece that contains a short strip of 16mm film—featuring scenes of a performance with Mataré and the kit in the metro system, and natural scenes like a river running through a lush forest, and a beach in Denpasar, Indonesia—plus a small speaker playing bird sounds and a little pot of green grass. The project was an expression of the artist’s impulse, as is recorded in his notes, to “begin [a] technological de-learning process and environmentally influenced art while traveling in foreign countries.”

John Doe Co.’s prototypes reflected an early sensibility of product design, using new materials that would later be mass-produced in consumer electronics like the molded plastic Apple iMac G3. The *Specimen Viewer* (1970) series, for instance, are colored plexiglass boxes holding organically shaped vacuum-



Specimen Viewer No. 1, 1970, Plexiglas, vacuum formed acrylic plastic, plastic cases, four specimen cases, LED lights, wiring, metal latch, and hinges, 27.94 × 30.48 × 48.26 cm.



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Art Tool Paint Experiments, Paint Dipper in Display Box, 1972, wood and paint, 20.32 × 45.72 × 30.48 cm.

formed acrylic devices with LED lights that illuminate slides containing artificially created, but natural-looking specimens. Imagining an even larger console for viewing “specimens”—artificial forms, resembling insects or viscous liquids—Cheng designed John Doe Co.’s three-meter-long *Organic Visualizer / Assembler* (1970), which featured a rotating drum whose surface was covered in these specimens and a globe whose textured surface could be viewed through a magnifying lens. And like a consumer electronics company, Cheng recreated, and updated, this piece as *Organic Visualizer / Assembler 2.0* in 2016. Many of John Doe Co.’s early “nature machines” were ultimately given a showcase in 1975 at California Institute of Technology’s Baxter Art Gallery, where Cheng displayed his “human rocks” from the Erosion Machine in rows on the gallery floor. Melinda Wortz, a reviewer for the *Artweek* magazine issue from May 31, 1975, described Cheng’s creations as looking “more like science than art, although they incorporate aspects of earth art and process art.”

Cheng was never interested in being a commercial artist or working regularly with a gallery. Several of John Doe Co.’s “art tools” seem to satirize abstract painting, like the prototypes for machines built into briefcases, *Art Tool Paint Experiments, Paint Dipper in Display Box* (1972) and *Dip and Drip* (1972), which imagine machines that could do the actions of pouring and dripping paint instead of the artists themselves. For Cheng, developing new processes for art making—even in the area of abstract painting—was his primary motivation. “All the ideas are happening out on the West Coast . . . That’s why I’m in L.A. It’s up to the artist to make something out of all this technology. It’s the raw material of our time,” he said in 2002.

This interest in technology and new ideas dovetailed with his desires to place his works in the public sphere. One of John Doe Co.’s early products had been the *Family Entertainment Center* (1968), a wave machine mounted on two columns that Cheng imagined installed on the beach or a meadow. Then, during 1974, in the months before President Richard Nixon’s resignation on August 8, while the Watergate scandal was gripping the nation,

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John Doe Co. debuted a new line of products, the *Alternative TV* series (1974), in the windows of several independent bookstores on Berkeley's Telegraph Avenue. Using salvaged television sets, Cheng replaced the tube with "rock landscape aquariums" filled with stones, plastic plants, and small objects found on the beaches of the Pacific during his travels. He described these devices as optimal for the "highest definition viewing of [a] new alternative channel." Cheng's vision of a world where the natural and artificial are comingled has a utopian, idealistic spirit. "To me, what's important is getting art into society. We have so much ugliness here in our environment. Things are so throw-away," he told Whittaker.

In 1979, Cheng was renting a studio on the Santa Monica Pier. He convinced the pier manager to let him use the windows of a nearby condemned building, formerly a restaurant and dance club known as Sinbad's. On the exterior wall, he set up a board with instructions, and ten small vitrine windows (each labeled with a code) in which he had placed what he called organic sculptures, resembling the devotional objects that he had seen on his travels in India and Southeast Asia. While there was no description of these objects, after the visitor inserted a quarter and selected a code corresponding to one of the vitrines, they could look inside the building through another window at a large sand surface. With one pass of a mechanical rake, the sand would be smoothed, and then, as the rake moved back, it would dip down in various arbitrary but abstract patterns. It was one of his "art tools" finally realized as a full-scale installation, and he called it *Natural Museum of Modern Art*.

While enjoying the enormous range of reactions and instantaneous connections with the public over the year, Cheng was inspired by the views of the beach all the way up the coast to Malibu. He began to imagine an artwork that used the entire beach, a project that took many years to develop and get official approval for: *Santa Monica Art Tool: Walk on LA* (1988), a 14-ton cast-concrete roller that created a five-centimeter deep imprint on the beach's sand with the outline of an aerial view of the city. For nearly two decades, a cast-concrete signage board explaining



Top to bottom, left to right: *Alternative TV* #3, #7, and #6, 1974, plastic chassis, acrylic water tank, air pump, LED lighting and controller, electrical cord, aquarium hardware, conglomerated rocks, and plastic plants, 36.8 x 29.2 x 20.3 cm; 27.94 x 22.86 x 21.59 cm; and 33.02 x 25.4 x 20.32 cm.

the project and the roller itself resided on the beach north of the pier, and one weekend a month it would be hitched to the back of a municipal tractor and rolled across the sand to the delight of beachgoers. It became such an iconic local landmark that it even appeared in the 2004 video game *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*.

In subsequent decades, John Doe Co. would produce numerous other public artworks. *Seattle Underwater* (1980) was a large window-like frame filled with water that was placed in front of a panoramic viewing spot at Seattle's highest point; a computer designed by Fred Iguchi created ring-shaped bubbles that would drift up through the vista. The work survived for more than a decade until it was vandalized in 1991. John Doe Co.'s later projects include an expansive stone landscape for a public library in Tempe, Arizona, in 1996; a pavilion that incorporated reflections and shadows of faces on the water surface around Pier 11 in New York City in 2001; and a sky-facing image of an underwater view of fish swimming in the blue sea that was installed outside of the Santa Monica Public Library in 2005. During his recent residency at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2017–18, he further developed ideas for the *Tar Pool Project* that he began in 1990, responding to the La Brea Tar Pits near the Museum with a machine that will dip a large board with a hole into raw tar, like one of his early "art tools." Each of these public sculptures, he would come to explain, were the "result from an attitude that says, 'We, humans, are not adversaries of nature but are a part of nature.'"

While the reality of humanity's impact on the Earth, crystallized in phenomenon like climate change and nuclear accidents, has taken decades to emerge in our consciousness, finally, the term "anthropocene" caught up with Cheng in the early 2000s, as seen in the series *Anthropocene Landscape* (2006), for which he creates grids of green and gold computer microchips so that they resemble the industrial agricultural landscapes of California's Central Valley

and the American southwest. Here, using dramatic shifts in scale, Cheng visualizes how technology is shaping and mastering earth so that a bed of microprocessors can be momentarily indistinguishable from the human-created macro landscape. As nature is subsumed into our technological universe, we also become responsible for its maintenance.

In a 2020 conversation with gallerist Philip Martin, Cheng explained that the title of his 2016 exhibition "Nature is Everything – Everything is Nature" was the "culmination of lots of personal insights of my own, spiritual and otherwise." He added, "We can say that nature is the only thing that we can't really conquer—we think we can, but we don't."

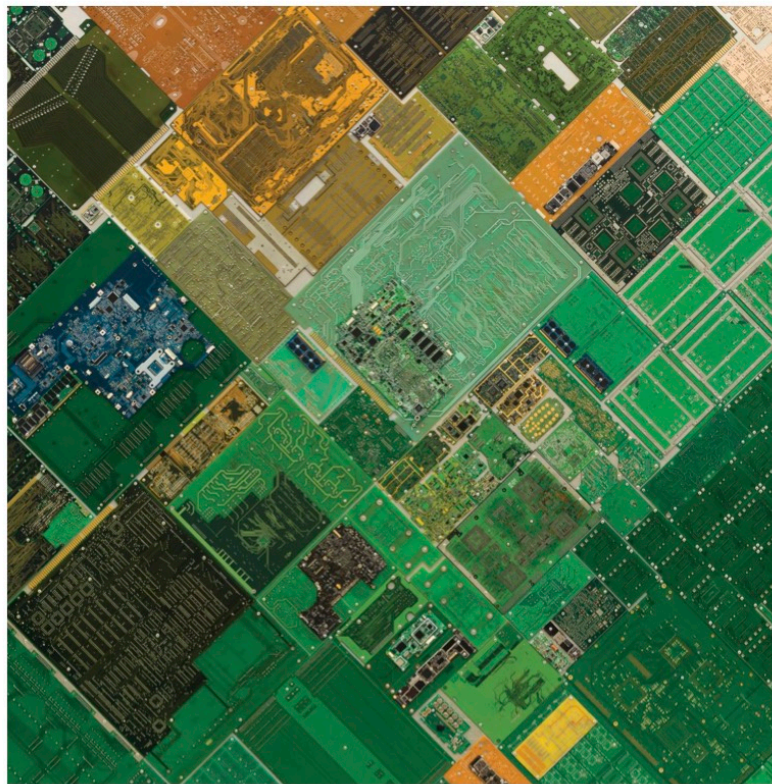


Natural Museum of Modern Art, 1979, coin-operated console, two canopied windows, and sand table, 365.8 × 609.6 cm.

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Santa Monica Art Tool: Walk on LA, 1988, concrete roller, steel armature, and steel hitch, 274.3 x 365.8 cm.



Anthropocene Landscape 2, 2006, printed circuit boards and rivets on aluminium, 152.4 x 152.4 cm.

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