

FINANCIAL TIMES

Griffin, Jonathan. "Artist Carl Cheng: 'I'm not a guy that wants to be a celebrity.'" *Financial Times*, August 27, 2024



Carl Cheng amid his work, photo by Paul Salvesson

Artist Carl Cheng: 'I'm not a guy that wants to be a celebrity'

His first retrospective, at the age of 82, showcases work which satirises wealth, technology and the American drive for more.

Tourists and surfers strolling down the Santa Monica pier in 1979 would have passed a mysterious awning advertising "The Natural Museum of Modern Art". A nearby explanatory panel did little to clarify: "The Natural Museum of Modern Art project is part of an ongoing interest by the John Doe Co in natural objects and phenomena."

A sign invited members of the public to insert a quarter into a slot, then press a button to make a selection from small boxes displaying organic specimens such as a piece of bone or a preserved fish head. Coin dropped and button pushed, they could peer through a window and watch a mechanical arm inscribe patterns — ambiguously correlated to their selection — into a table of raked sand.

"The Natural Museum of Modern Art" was a public art project by Carl Cheng, who opens his first retrospective this September at the Contemporary Austin, Texas, at the age of 82. The exhibition, led by the museum's head curator, Alex Klein, will travel to Philadelphia, Maastricht, Basel and, finally, Los Angeles: quite a tour for an artist who, until recently, was recognised by few even in LA's tight-knit local art scene.

"I'm not a guy that wants to be a celebrity," Cheng says when we meet at the Santa Monica home and studio he built in 1990. A spry octogenarian with a ponytail and sports sandals, he recalls a childhood spent in the San Fernando Valley — an area in the postwar years experiencing "uncontrolled growth in every way", as he puts it, farms carved into "the cheapest residential subdivisions you can imagine". His Chinese-American father, a Stanford graduate, stockbroker and keen photographer, and his mother, an artist who did animation work for Disney, encouraged Cheng and his three brothers to pursue creative careers.

Since his time studying at the University of California, Los Angeles, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Cheng has been just as drawn to the techniques and materials of industrial design as to the philosophical gravitas and imaginative possibilities of fine art. "All the plastics and materials were exotic to me," he says. "The sculpture department never used plastic. They never had any vocabulary like that." After graduating, he attended the Folkwang-Hochschule in Essen, Germany, which was influenced by Bauhaus ideals of disciplinary cross-pollination.

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Carl Cheng
Erosion Machine No. 4, 1969
Plexiglas, metal racks and fittings, plastic, water pump, LED lights, black light, pebbles, 4 erosion rocks, wood base
15 x 25 x 9 in
38.1 x 63.5 x 22.86 cm

He returned to California as much an inventor as artist, an awkward fit for the art market at that time. To make a living, he worked for a spell as a model-maker for Charles and Ray Eames, the designers whose output included films and exhibitions as well as furniture and buildings.

Cheng incorporated John Doe Co in the late 1960s on the advice of his tax accountant, who suggested that the IRS might raise an eyebrow about Cheng's deductibles, which included such unconventional artistic media as nichrome wire, motors and vacuum-formed plastics.

His series of Erosion Machines, stamped with the John Doe Co logo and dated 1969, embody the broadness of his aims and methods. The sculptures, which resemble Day-Glo yellow microwaves, are meant to be loaded with what the artist calls "human rocks" — specially made lumps of aggregate material — and filled with water. When plugged in, a water jet slowly erodes the "rock" under an LED light. The machines are entertaining to watch, in a fairground-type way, but they are also depressing satires on the usurping of natural forces by human-made, technological surrogates.

Despite his affiliation with the field of industrial design, Cheng was soon disillusioned with what he considered its dishonesty and irresponsibility — especially in postwar America, where planned obsolescence and tiered levels of finish compelled consumers to buy more and discard more. "In Germany, after world war two, they had nothing, they were all bombed out," Cheng says. As a result, postwar German design emphasised formal economy and longevity. "Their style was just simple and direct," he says, citing the example of Braun radios and clocks. "German design is very permanent." Unlike, he observes, the wasteful US.

He is currently working on an acerbic, 14-foot-high golden obelisk titled "Billion to One Per Cent Trophy", covered with hollow cardboard bullion. "I can't stand the idea of celebrating a person that's rich. Another culture would be ashamed to say that. Here we have guys that brag about their richness and do stupid things to show how rich they are. Just drives me crazy. We're that immature."

Travelling in Asia, Cheng made humble portable objects from whatever came to hand, things he would later term "Unspecified Artifacts" or "Emotional Tools". In his studio, Cheng opens a velvet-lined box to show a wooden device, about the size of a pen, with five spikes on the end. Inscribed on the box is "Bali, Indonesia, 11/1971". "What do you do with that?" he wonders aloud. "I don't know."

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Carl Cheng's Santa Monica Art Tool (1988)

The idea of indeterminate functionality stuck with Cheng, and for much of the rest of his career he has produced what he called "Art Tools". One such tool resided from 1988 until 2016 on the Santa Monica beach: a concrete roller, nine feet in diameter and 12 feet long, which could be towed by a tractor. On its surface was a relief design evocative of LA seen from the air; when pulled over the sand, the device imprinted a miniature cityscape. Cheng titled the piece "Walk on LA"; it was not incidental that viewers destroyed the city as they walked across it.

For most of his career, Cheng made his living from public art commissions such as this. Some were architectural in scale, and involved collaboration with civic councils, local communities, architects and engineers — such as his 1995 design for the Redondo Beach Metro station, south of Los Angeles. He titled it "The Museum of Space Information" and embedded sculptural references to both deep space and deep-sea phenomena under a blue glass canopy. (Today, Cheng bitterly calls it "the ruin of the information station" because of its dilapidated, vandalised condition; he decries local councils' inability — or unwillingness — to maintain public art.)

Cheng re-entered the contemporary art market in the mid-2010s when the LA gallerist Philip Martin exhibited his early photographic sculptures; he had his first solo exhibition at the gallery in 2016 and has been the subject of growing interest from museums previously unaware of his prodigious output.

Alex Klein was working at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, when she began researching and cataloguing Cheng's art. She has since facilitated the restoration of his older pieces that sat in storage for many years, including "Art Tool: Rake 1022", which was prototyped in "The Natural Museum of Modern Art" in 1979 and exhibited last year at Redcat gallery in LA. Cheng will deploy the newly functional rake to make a large sand drawing for the Contemporary Austin, which will be swept away after the show. The touring retrospective is titled, aptly, *Nature Never Loses*.

Cheng does not see himself as a political artist or an environmental crusader, just someone saying what's obvious. "At my age," Cheng says, "you kind of see things a little bigger, you see the trends that have happened and failures and stuff. When you think about it, how can you not be involved in the environment at this point?"