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Dalbow, Tara Anne. "Carl Cheng | A Ceaseless Encounter With Nature, An Enduring Vision." Flaunt Magazine, Issue 194, Close Encounters, 2024



Carl Cheng
Early Warning System, 1969-2023
Fabricated plastic, electronics, projector mechanism, radio, wheat, wood
74 x 37 x 37 in
188 x 94 x 94 cm

Aerospace grade aluminum, avocado seeds, surfeit cerulean plexiglass, chemistry pipettes, stumps from abandoned Christmas trees, defunct miniature TVs, Wonder Bread, and organic specimens scavenged from shores around the world: these are just a few of the things that 82-year-old artist Carl Cheng has turned into art. Known for his genre-defying objects and inventory public installations, Cheng has an alchemist's talent for wresting something from nothing. In his hands, a tray of sand becomes an artifact as stirring and salient as any painting in a museum.

Sitting in his sunny Santa Monica studio, surrounded by shadow boxes of rocks, tools of ambiguous form and function, antiquated appliances, and vitrines of curios reminiscent of wonder cabinets from the Renaissance, it's difficult to imagine a material that Cheng couldn't transform into an objet d'art. Dressed in a T-shirt and shorts, the California native apologized for the "empty" studio, explaining that most of his work, including archival materials, had already been sent to The Contemporary Austin. While it's true that of the more than sixty objects comprising the visionary artist's first in- depth survey, three-fourths came directly from his studio—the lofty room is anything but empty.

Spanning six decades, Carl Cheng: Nature Never Loses gathers three-dimensional photo collages, mechanized sculptures, art tools, artifacts, and film footage from his many large-scale public art installations. Evidence of his flair for transfiguration and uncanny foresight abound. "I don't know about any of that," Cheng says after I ask if he could speak to the ways his work anticipated today's existential ecological awareness. "If anyone thinks that about my work, it will be a revelation to me." As I expound on his formative inquiries into unsustainable paradigms and catastrophic climate corollaries, he waves me off, giggling. Amongst other things, Cheng is exceedingly humble and has an incredibly infectious laugh.

The prescience of his vision seems less of an observation and more of a fact that can be traced throughout his career, beginning with one of the oldest works in the exhibition, "Early Warning System" (1967). Housed within a cyan-plastic cruciform tower, a radio plays the local maritime weather while two rotating projectors cast collaged footage of man-made waste: oil spills and overflowing landfills. Cheng fabricated the mechanized sculpture, envisaged as a hilltop beacon for alerting people to worsening pollution and imminent disaster, in 1967. Predating the Environmental Protection Agency, his forewarnings began 40 years before the majority of the American public learned the term "global warming" and half a century before the international community initiated a climate agreement.

Cheng is also widely cited as the first artist to address the conditions of the Anthropocene. Before meteorologist Paul J. Crutzen introduced the term, Cheng had designated obsolete man-made technologies as "human rocks" and designed a range of instruments adapted for an epoch in which human civilization's inexorable mark was permanently imprinted on the Earth's atmosphere and landscape. As with his "Erosion Machines" (1969), acid-yellow tanks similar in shape and size to microwaves that pummel "human rocks" with high-powered jet streams and, in his words, "model nature, its processes and effects for a future environment that may be completely made by humans."

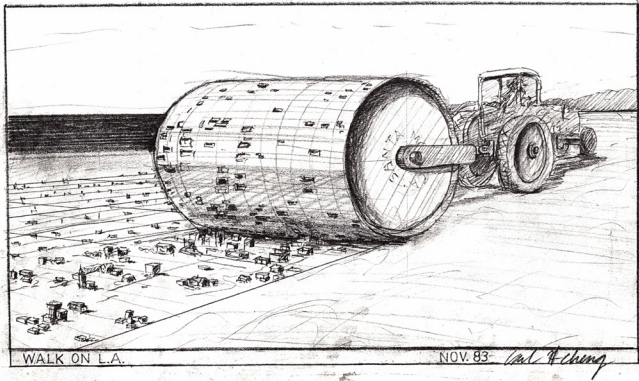
Born in San Francisco in 1942 and raised in the San Fernando Valley, northwest of Downtown LA, Cheng witnessed the calamitous effects of human development on the land firsthand. As the aerospace and movie industries took over the nascent city, the valley's farms were transformed into sprawling suburbs seemingly overnight. "Everything around me was man- made. The natural landscape was gone; I grew up in a wasteland, in an atmosphere of nothingness," he tells me. "There were big surplus sales on the weekends at Lockheed, where you could buy exotic materials like airplane aluminum, military spec bolts, and scrap parts, and at Disney, but with old camera equipment. There was already so much junk everywhere."

Apropos of his surroundings, Cheng studied industrial design as an undergraduate, spent time immersed in the Bauhaus- inflected curriculum at Folkwang School of the Arts in Essen, and then pursued a master's degree from Robert Heinecken's

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Carl Cheng
Santa Monica Art Tool Drawing, 1983
Courtesy the artist.

newly formed photography department at the University of California. Along the way, the young artist-inventor bore witness to the material wastefulness and corporate zeal dominating the design industry, as well as the commercialization and celebrity of the art world. "Considering the planned obsolescence and the fervor for money, I knew I couldn't be a part of it; the industry lacked all sense of humanity," Cheng explained. "As for the art market, they wanted a signature style, to turn art making into a cottage industry. I wasn't interested in that at all; I wanted to experiment, to develop new things with new materials."

Rather than work for a corporation, Cheng became one. Subverting conventional expectations of the production and presentation of art, he established entirely novel rules of engagement. Under the auspice of John Doe Co., he furthered his access to material manufacturers and undermined the pervasive anti-Asian discrimination that coincided with the Vietnam War. Ultimately, the corporate moniker, stamped on the bottom of his serial sculptures, suited his scientific approach to testing and experimenting with multiple copies of the same artwork, and foregrounded his critique of art's collusion with consumerism.

"I didn't realize until later what it meant to have the freedom that I did. The reason I was able to do all that crazy stuff was because no one was really paying attention to me," Cheng explains. He attributes his relative anonymity to California's lawlessness, the lack of precedent compared to New York City, and enduring racial marginalization. "They couldn't relate to me as a normal person, so they tried to fit me into these ideas of what Asians are," he told me. "People would look at my work and tie it to Zen Buddhism, Taoism, or some ancient thing that had nothing to do with it. I was using brand new technology; it made no sense."

Indeed, it's difficult to see the material connection between belief systems dating back to the 5th century BCE and Cheng's high-tech, plexiglass-encased machines. Consider his series of futuristic Specimen Viewers (1970): candy-colored acrylic apparatuses suspended inside cerulean plastic cases resembling the 1998 Apple iMac shell, used to illuminate specimen slides containing ambiguous biological matter. Or "Supply & Demand" (1972), an enclosed diorama-size biosphere with two humidity-controlled chambers connected by a tube: on one side, there were flies, fly eggs, larvae, and pupae, and on the other, half a dozen venus flytraps.

The technological virtuosity and rigorous scientific inquiry that characterized many of the "nature machines" and supply kits from John Doe Co.'s initial offerings also carried over to his public art installations. As with the "Natural Museum of Modern Art" (1979), housed in a condemned dance hall on the Santa Monica Pier, where visitors could pay a quarter to select one of the ten vitrine windows containing sculptural organic specimens, or "Sand Rake" (1978), where they could watch a mechanical rake draw abstract patterns across a seemingly vast expanse of sand.

Considering the modern bifurcation of art and science, Cheng's elegant elisions become all the more radical. When I ask how he navigated between the two fields, he tells me they were one and the same. "They're both nature. Everything is nature," he explained. "Put together Meister Eckhart saying God is nature and Einstein's theory telling you energy and mass are the same thing, and you've got it all: nature is everything." After recalling an incident from the week prior when he asked his phone for the definition of nature, and it responded by defining it as "everything in the universe except man," Cheng observed that no Asian culture would ever separate them like that. The survey title, *Nature Never Loses*, follows from this thinking.

Cheng's views of nature, tendency toward anonymity, and disinterest in consumerism were substantiated and amplified by his protracted travels throughout Asia in the 70s, prompting him to focus on the public art sector instead of the commercial gallery scene. "Even more than China, India changed my entire life. It's non-materialist. Meaning that your being becomes the one thing that makes things happen for you because you attract them. You have to start looking into yourself, not just buying clothing or something like that." Cheng explains. "Imagine: all this art, altars covered in offerings on the sides of the streets, and elephants carved from rocks as big as two-story houses, and no one knows who the artist is. Nobody cares

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Documentation of Carl Cheng's, *Santa Monica Art Tool*, 1988
Courtesy the artist.

about that there." When I ask what he thinks that means for the role of the artist, he explains that, similar to a poet, artists provide insight and "create moments of introspection and meaning."

Most if not all of Cheng's sculptures give you something to think about. His "Alternative TVs" (1974)—salvaged television sets filled with totemic rocks, plastic plants, and small organic materials gathered from beaches along the Pacific—feel particularly contemplative, animating opportunities to watch yourself watching. And yet, his large-scale public installations triumph in terms of reverie and revelation. Take, for example, his first commissioned public art project, "Seattle Underwater" (1980), a large water-filled tank shaped like a window frame installed at the highest viewpoint in Seattle. As visitors gazed upon the metropolis plunged underwater, ring-shaped bubbles drifted up from the base of the retrofitted frame. Whether or not the vista through the aperture is a vision of the future is both literally and figuratively up to the participant.

More than his technical acumen or social awareness, I can't help but think it's his ability to see meaning where others can't—the utility in the refuse, the discovery in the familiar, the beauty in the lead, even before it's been turned to gold—and render it visible to everyone, that makes his public projects so affecting. "The potential of public art is to make us value what we have [now]," Cheng explained in a 2004 interview with Richard Whittaker. Attending to any of his artworks or even his UAs (unspecified artifacts) is an act of revaluation, a reacquiescence with the generative possibilities of a seed pod, air bubble, or "human rock."

After our conversation, Cheng walks me around his not-so-empty empty studio, identifying the many objects made from avocado skins, demonstrating the functions of various wood instruments, and telling me about the installations photographed on the walls. "This one gets pulled across the beach by a tractor as it imprints the sand with an aerial view of the city of LA," he explains, pointing toward a faded photo of what looks at first like a massive scroll covered in hieroglyphs but is actually a 14-ton cast-concrete roller. In all the archival photography, the smiling people dressed for a day at the beach stand gingerly along the edges of the miniature cityscape, careful, if only for a few moments, not to destroy the world beneath their feet.