

ARTFORUM

Harren, Natilee. "Natilee Harren on Carl Cheng,"
Artforum, Vol. 63, No. 4, December 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

Looking as if they could have been made yesterday, Carl Cheng's "Erosion Machines," 1969–2020, consist of aquarium-like neon containers holding stones fabricated from man-made and organic detritus. The rocks get blasted with jets of water, as if to demonstrate "the dreaded effects of human erosion (vandalism) [that] must be accepted as just another process of nature." Cheng said this in a 2000 Los Angeles Times op-ed, defending the necessity of a market-critical, populist public art created to counterpoise "every piece of material junk, fake architecture, commercial decoration, false facade, screaming billboard and cheap construction"—elements that cause what the artist calls VUDS (Visual Ugliness Depression Syndrome), afflicting the urban landscape. Indeed, Cheng's photo-based works, social interventions, and sculptures (which he refers to, variously, as machines, tools, devices, appliances, and kits) pervert such ersatz structures to poetic and provocative effect. Thanks to "Nature Never Loses," a touring retrospective of the artist's industrious practice featuring works from the mid-1960s to present, we can now grasp the full range of his prescient techno-materialist critique.

Coming of age in midcentury Los Angeles, Cheng had productively multivalent notions of "industry." Two thousand pounds of aerospace junk culled from a string of Lockheed Martin swap meets (yes, really) became Technology Giveaway, 1970, a street intervention in which Cheng, sans any official permission, offered goody bags of the rubble outside an art and technology symposium in LA. His counter to the entertainment industry (Hollywood, Disneyland, even the art world) was the Natural Museum of Modern Art, 1978–80, a coin-operated art machine installed in a Santa Monica Pier storefront: Viewers could activate a robotic arm outfitted with twigs that etched abstract patterns into a bed of sand. A third valence came from Cheng's Bauhaus-inspired training at the University of California, Los Angeles, where he studied in the school's industrial-design program and worked in its photography studio, headed by Robert Heinecken. Cheng claims, in all seriousness, Leonardo da Vinci and Marcel Duchamp as his most important influences, their practices overlapping to form a Venn diagram that imagines the artist as inventor/conceptualist. He is a maker not of objects but of tools: things that make and do other things. Hence the unusually long temporal brackets that mark so many of Cheng's projects—he's constantly tinkering with his work.

Embracing the role of product designer, Cheng created several consumer prototypes with accompanying print and film advertisements. These include *Early Warning System*, 1967–2024, a ziggurat-shaped beacon animated with projected images of human-generated pollution and a live broadcast of maritime weather reports, as well as *Emergency Nature Supply Kit* (E.N. Supply, No. 271-OJ), 1970, a lunch box-like case attended by a miniature patch of grass and recordings of bird calls. A campy sci-fi ad features Cheng's partner, designer Felice Mataré, wearing a metallic jumpsuit and face mask as "Agent Felix," prowling the Osaka, Japan, subway with the kit as her only provision. Cheng's *First Generation Family Entertainment Center*, 1968–2020, whose title winks at his Chinese American background, is a mesmerizing, media console-size wave machine with light and sound elements, which, in earlier presentations, was equally at home at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery and the California State Fair. Cheng released many of these "art tool" prototypes under the LLC John Doe Co., thus gaining access to industrial supplies, tax benefits, and richer avenues of subversion. The name, a neo-dadaist device critiquing

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Carl Cheng

Natural Museum of Modern Art, 1979

Coin-operated console, two canopied windows, sand table

Bread vitrine: 19 x 48.5 x 3.25 in

48.26 x 123.19 x 8.26 cm

Coin-operated console: 39.75 x 48.25 in

100.97 x 122.56 cm

Overall: 144 x 240 in

365.8 x 609.6 cm

the commodification of art, also functioned as a means of evading anti-Asian racism during the height of the Vietnam War.

Like his one-man corporation, Cheng's turn to public art commissions after 1980 allowed him access to vital, practice-sustaining support. His Santa Monica Art Tool (Walk on L.A.), 1983–88, which bested proposals from Larry Bell, Nancy Holt, and James Turrell, was a massive concrete roller that impressed a scrolling picture of an urban landscape onto the sands of a public beach: an ambivalent message about the failed promises of city planning and its effects on the environment.

The exhibition concludes spectacularly with Human Landscapes-TCA72024, 2024, an ephemeral sand drawing that was executed with a rehabbed art tool (originally constructed in 1979) that debosses patterns, blows air, and drips water. The work allegorizes the relationship between humans, technology, and the natural world. More crucially, it is a meditation on the mechanics of creating meaning through art, utilizing the most essential and elementary of means.

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