

BROOKLYN RAIL

Sage Kay, Hannah. "Carl Cheng: Nature Never Loses,"
The Brooklyn Rail, ArtSeen, November 2024.



Carl Cheng
Alternative TV #3, 1974
Plastic chassis, acrylic water tank, air pump, LED lighting and controller,
electrical cord, aquarium hardware, conglomerated rocks, plastic plant(s)
14 1/2 x 11 1/2 x 8 in
36.8 x 29.2 x 20.3 cm

Incorporated as John Doe Co. in the late 1960s so as to better deduct unconventional artistic materials without raising the suspicion of the IRS, Carl Cheng's chosen incorporation name was additionally a response to the Vietnam War and rising prejudices pertaining to Asian Americans in the United States. Shielding his work from a reading that prioritized identity and a racialized lens, Cheng's career reflects his astute attunement to the way things are and what they might become, proffering an ever-lively, sometimes playful, sometimes foreboding commentary on the conditions of the Anthropocene.

Some of Cheng's work questions a distinctly American relationship to consumerism, posing a critique of mass media and the entrenched value systems of an insipidly passive public. This approach is exemplified by his series "Alternative TV" (1974–2016), which takes the form of TV sets painted black, with a rock garden where the screen should be. His First Generation Family Entertainment Center (1968–2020) similarly replaces what should be a TV console with what looks like a toxic, neon wave machine, suggesting the hypnotic effect of the screen, regardless of the content it transmits. However, what resounds most clearly throughout his current survey exhibition, *Nature Never Loses*, at the Contemporary Austin, is the unanticipated resilience of the natural world and our enduring obliviousness to its resolve.

The exhibition begins with two wall works titled *Anthropocene Landscape 1* and *2* (both 2006), which from a few feet away register as aerial views of the Earth from 6,000 and 30,000 feet, complete with perfectly sheered crop circles in gridded planes of green and brown, oil storage tanks, tract housing, interstate highways, and major metropolises. A closer look, however, reveals that they are composed of found circuit boards, underscoring our relentless imposition of a mathematical, human-made order onto an organic one. Although his adoption of the circuit board as an artistic medium may prompt one to imagine what it might be like if our human-made structures did not adhere to a rectilinear mathematical system and instead took on curvilinear, possibly even biomorphic, formations, their use more immediately highlights the pervasive violence of our transfiguration of the landscape. The sheer fact that, from afar, nature could be indistinguishable from technology is not simply a clever use of unconventional materials but also a deeply demoralizing fact of our existence.

Cheng often undermines this abusive relationship by willingly embracing the natural elements as a collaborator in his artistic processes. His "Scroll Series" (1979), which mimics the practice of framing nature characteristic of Chinese landscape painting, makes no demands of the land itself. These photos picture an individual holding a scroll with a rectangular window cut out of its center, revealing a forest or mountain view. Here, Cheng observes a landscape rather than augmenting it, his gesture paying homage to our world's most ineffable qualities via a humble reverence for things we can never hope to recreate.

Taking a very different tack are his series of "Erosion Machines" (1969–2020), which emulate natural processes in a controlled, manmade environment. Composed of commercial materials (plexiglass, metal racks, LED lights, a water pump, and so on), these florescent green boxes come complete with a store of "human rocks"—variously shaped plaster forms embedded with technological or other found objects—on one side, and a chamber on the other that when turned on continuously sprays a "human rock" with water, eroding its surface and eventually its substrate. These machines mimic prior "Erosion Experiments" that Cheng conducted in his *Nature Laboratory* (1966–90), a rooftop in Los Angeles where he left organic and inorganic materials to decompose by simply exposing them to the wind, rain, and sun. These gestures, like the title of this exhibition, suggest that "nature never loses"—it will, given enough time, ultimately prevail. But Cheng's work also causes one to wonder just how much human garbage our world can digest.

Cheng's first public art project indirectly answers this question. Titled *The Natural Museum of Modern Art* (1978–80), it was sited in a condemned building on the Santa Monica Pier under an awning advertising it as a "museum" and featured, amongst other things, artifacts of his "Erosion Series" for sale (5 dollars apiece) in a glass vitrine. The artifacts, or rather "human rocks," in question are simply

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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

individual pieces of Wonder Bread, each pressed with an indiscernible object to create a low relief print that remains perfectly preserved nearly fifty years later, sealed in clear plastic bags above cardboard boxes used to store and transport them after purchase. Not unlike a Twinkie (which Cheng might very well deem a "human rock" as well) left out in the rain that refuses to decompose, these chemically altered slices of bread prove impervious to time.

The longevity of such "human rocks" creates a sense of melancholy that persists throughout the exhibition, reminding visitors that we are all ultimately beholden to a gridded, concrete world wherein green spaces do not testify to the uninhibited growth of flora and fauna, but instead the relentless control of the human-made environment. In seeming acknowledgement of this fact, the artist leaves no obvious scar of his own on the landscape. His work, which often submits to the natural lifetime of its materials, is in many ways an embodiment of empathy.

For example, Santa Monica Art Tool (Walk on L.A.) (1983–88), Cheng's first public art commission, took the form of a massive concrete roller that when pulled behind a tractor on the sand created a three-dimensional print of the city. Appropriating the same construction materials used in the production of our built environment, Cheng ultimately produced a cityscape that could be stomped out by a beachgoer's feet or blown away by a strong gust of wind. Similarly, Human Landscapes-TCA72024 (2024), a high relief, room-sized floor drawing in sand, represents an abstracted cityscape or topographical map. While evocative of Michael Heizer's City (1970–2022) in the Nevada desert, this ephemeral gesture operates somewhere between Tibetan sand mandalas and a Zen garden, serving as the antithesis of Heizer's theoretically permanent intervention in the landscape.

And so, after all that nourishes and sustains us is gone, will Cheng's Emergency Nature Supply Kit/Subway Wormhole Project (1970/2015) save us? Can a small, easily transportable, pyramidal case housing a patch of grass and bird sounds provide a dose of long-vanished nature to the inhabitants of a future, post-apocalyptic world? Studies have shown that test takers in an urban environment who look at a picture of a landscape perform better than those that didn't. Perhaps all we'll have left one day are "pictures" like Cheng's Emergency Nature Supply Kit or his "Alternative TV"—we would do well to hold onto them.