

Frieze Week Magazine

Liu, Xin; Cheng, Carl. "Nothing Lasts Forever": Carl Cheng's Six Decades of Change," Frieze Week Magazine, February 10, 2025.



Carl Cheng
Santa Monica Art Tool, 1988
Concrete roller, steel armature, steel hitch
108 x 144 in
274.3 x 365.8 cm

Xin Liu When you started at UCLA in 1958, you began with painting but then switched to industrial design. Then, later on, you became one of the first graduate students in the new photography department. How was your time at UCLA? And how did you make the decision to evolve through different disciplines?

Carl Cheng I went to UCLA thinking I was going to be a painter, but then I didn't like what was happening in painting – it seemed very backward to me. When I was in the sculpture department and saw that they were designing the inside of an airplane, I just changed my major right there and then because I wanted to use new materials. I was fascinated by more modern stuff – plastics and metal and other forms of art.

In those days, industrial design was taught in art schools, as part of a Bauhaus-like educational system that encouraged artists to get into industry and not separate themselves from it.

XL And what is your process now for making objects? Do you normally have a plan or sketch, or is it more reactive? I can see a bit of both in your work.

CC I only do drawings for specific reasons. Generally, I don't start by making drawings. When I began making art, I mostly just picked up stuff – junk – and tried to make something out of it. I was willing to pick up anything: if I picked up stones, that was just as important as picking up nuts and bolts, and I did whatever I felt like doing with it. Now, when I look back, I see that what I did was fabricate everything using many different types of materials.

XL How do you approach the balance of functionality and aesthetics in your work?

CC Because I went to a university where they taught art and not an art school, I was able to take other courses that interested me. Even though I didn't want to become an engineer, I took physics, for instance. I was always fascinated by physical phenomena in nature and geology, so I took geology classes, too.

XL I am curious about the origin story of your Art Tool project in Santa Monica in 1988. For me, it recalled a traditional Chinese farm, with cows pulling contraptions to plant crops. Of course, it's very different – it's much more industrial.

CC But I think that's appropriate, because I had an uncle with a farm in the San Fernando Valley. He grew asparagus. We ended up staying there for a while when I was five years old, because my father was looking for a place for us to live. It was so fun. They had all kinds of machines. There was one to harvest asparagus and another that automatically made a crate for it. Just watching the machinery as a kid was fascinating. They used to till the ground using a horse, then later they bought a tractor. So, there is some connection to farming, but not directly. I think, for me, the roller was to do with printing. It was more about a graphic standpoint – that you can print and emboss stuff by pressing into paper.

XL In a way, I think it also connects to your photography. Bruno Latour, the philosopher, wrote in the book *Laboratory Life* [1979] about how scien-

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Carl Cheng
Anthropocene Landscape 2, 2006
Printed circuit boards and rivets on aluminum
60 x 60 in
152.4 x 152.4 cm

tists would use instruments like a camera or microscope to interpret the natural world. I think there's something about that in your photography, too.

CC Photography allows you to see things you can't see. It distorts, but it also lets you see things faster or slower than the eye can perceive. To me, it's just a nice instrument rather than an art tool, which you can use in any way you want, not necessarily to make art.

XL What is your definition of a machine? I think you have a very particular relationship with the so-called functionality of something. You're an inventor, but also a storyteller.

CC It's all intuitive in my case. Being an inventor is easy for me because I'm always grabbing from different sources. To me, that's what inventing is like – it just comes out of an intuitive nature rather than an analytical one. I can give you an example: I developed a way of making ring bubbles. I was playing around with ring bubbles and making them do tricks, because they have a dynamic in them. Sometimes, two bubbles going up will hook together and make one big ring bubble. Sometimes they repel each other. They do funny things. I tried to create a sculpture that would make that happen by chance. I made a bunch of them and called them Friendship Acrobatic Troupe [1987], after Chinese acrobatics.

I created another piece using ring bubbles, called Seattle Underwater [1980]. It was at the highest point in Seattle and I made a window that was a water tank, so you could see through it and see the whole city skyline. After a couple of years, somebody threw a rock through it and broke it. I repaired it and it lasted for about another ten years, then somebody took a shotgun and blew it to pieces. So the city decided they couldn't support the work and we deaccessioned it. I don't know who did it but, for me, it was a shock that someone could get angry enough to do something like that.

XL Do you feel there is something fundamentally wrong about our desire to keep something as it is forever? Nature does not work that way. There's water and wind; things erode, people change. Rather than thinking something will last forever, should we be thinking about how to grow or how to allow something to disappear over the years?

CC No matter the material, there's a short lifespan unless you continuously maintain it. Marble will deteriorate, like New York marble is deteriorating because of the air quality. Bronze doesn't last, either. Nor does stainless steel. Nothing lasts forever.

Xin Liu is showing with Make Room (Stand F04) as part of Focus at Frieze Los Angeles 2025.

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