



THE ART NEWSPAPER

Akers, Tory. “It’s like playing jazz’: Carl Cheng reflects on his ecological investigations at the ICA in Philadelphia,” *The Art Newspaper*, March 3, 2025.



Installation view of Carl Cheng: *Nature Never Loses* at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. Photo: Constance Mensch. Courtesy Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia

The legendary Post-Minimalist artist Carl Cheng is all about systems, not instructions. The experimental artist-tinkerer has spent six decades defying genre and bucking institutional notions of branding in the broader marketplace, incorporating technology and ecology into his ever-evolving oeuvre. Years of tireless innovation come together in *Nature Never Loses*, a travelling survey show that testifies to the artist’s playful, prescient gaze.

The exhibition constitutes a true labor of love for Alex Klein, the head curator and director of curatorial affairs at The Contemporary Austin, where the traveling show made its debut last summer. Klein spent five years in dialogue with Cheng, carefully constructing a living window into the undersung artist’s consciousness. The show is now on view at the University of Pennsylvania’s Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia (until 6 April) and will move next to the Bonnefanten Museum in the Netherlands.

Cheng’s long-standing conceptual concerns have a pragmatic edge. His formative years studying industrial design at the University of California, Los Angeles and the Folkwang School of Arts in Germany in the mid-1960s introduced him to Bauhaus-style aesthetic methodologies, further informing his outlook on the Anthropocene.

For years, Cheng made work under the semi-anonymous pseudonym “John Doe Co”, eventually incorporating his studio under the name in 1967. The move was both intellectual and logistical, simultaneously a critique of corporate culture and a recommendation by his accountant, who suggested that technology companies might be more likely to respond to requests for material samples from a business letterhead. This outlook holds strong for the octogenarian, who does not romanticise his legacy.

“I’m not thinking about what my archive is,” Cheng tells *The Art Newspaper*. “I’m just thinking about what my life is, and then the archive is part of it.”

For Klein, Cheng’s clarity of vision is central to his output. “Carl is living an ethos as an artist. My role as a curator is to help to tell the story”, Klein says. “The show is laid out in six sections that articulate the themes in Carl’s work, because while it may look incredibly diverse on the surface, it’s actually a very consistent practice that Carl has been unpacking—these intersecting themes of technology and ecology and identity and the role of the human—for six decades. My role is to help people to navigate the incredible creativity and ambition of Carl’s work”.

That taste for in-betweenness leads to a sense of controlled entropy in Cheng’s practice, whether in the case of his signature *Erosion Machines* that simulate ecological processes at a sculptural scale, or his public, site-specific installations that depend on audience engagement for activation. “It’s like playing jazz,” says Cheng. “You play it, and then you can listen to it later and learn from it.”

Klein adds: “For several decades, Carl had a rooftop studio where he would be making work in collaboration with the weather, experimenting rather with how sun or wind or rain would affect these objects. It’s improvisation. He’s always trying to find something out.”

In an era defined by the ravages of climate change, Cheng’s work feels both immediate and oracular. In 1978, he embarked on the *Natural Museum of Modern Art* series, which included an immersive environment in a condemned building on the Santa Monica Pier. An interactive coin-operated kiosk used organic tools like seashells and pelican beaks to create patterns in the sand. His first public art commission, *Seattle Underwater* (1980), invited viewers to see the city’s skyline behind a water-filled window frame, creating the illusion of a submerged metropolis. In 2020, during a residency at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Cheng created *Tar Pool Project*, which centred a body of bubbling tar that mimicked natural petroleum seep. For Cheng, majesty and devastation travel in a pair, and the whims of the natural world foreclose the need for tidy professional definitions.

“He’s so incredibly inspiring for a younger generation of artists who are asking critical questions about the market, asking critical questions about process and materials, thinking about ways of having an art practice that exists outside of a homogenised artistic world dictated by capitalism,” Klein says.

As for Cheng, his priority is the work, not the rhetoric. “What younger artists have learned from me, I just leave that up to what they’re capable of learning,” he says. “That’s not my job. That’s *your* job.”

Philip Martin Gallery
3342 Verdugo Road, Los Angeles, CA 90065
www.philipmartingallery.com