

# BROOKLYN RAIL

Baker, Chenoa. “Carl Cheng: *Nature Never Loses*,” The Brooklyn Rail, March 2025.



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

“Everything can be turned into an artifact, a relic. There’s no waste. It all finds a place.”

—Carl Cheng, exhibition vinyl (coincidentally the same typeface as the font in *Speculative Everything* by Dunne and Raby, giving it a Futuristic resonance)

*Carl Cheng: Nature Never Loses*, connoting that the natural world subsumes the artificial one, is divided into six parts: “Photography as a Tool”; “Natural Processes and Nature Machines”; “Travel and Specimens”; “John Doe Co.” (the name he gave his studio after incorporating); “Art Tools”; and “Public Art Projects and Installations.” While this survey showcases artwork made in California since the 1960s—with the historical context of the Space Race, Maoism, the Vietnam War, and the development of Silicon Valley—its existence in other locales in the 2020s echoes a different timbre. Cheng (b. 1942 in San Francisco and currently living and working in Santa Monica) was influenced by the post-Bauhaus industrial design movement that saw design as interdisciplinary; therefore, his genre-defying work, anchored in Southern California, combines technology with industrial materials to work in hybrid media like molded plastic and photographic sculptural film, all present in the ICA Philadelphia’s exhibition.

An interstitial space between the first and second-floor galleries had a monograph that magnetized me: *Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada* (2015). Normally, this would be ignored, but it pulled me in like the choreography of curation. Purifoy used similar materials to Cheng, but they existed as sculptural reminders of the Watts Riots in which they were sourced. While Cheng has worked in Southern California since the sixties, he transformed industrial materials’ function into another purpose entirely.

In the first work, *Anthropocene Landscape 1* (2006), which opens the “Photography as a Tool” section, the viewer is confronted with a marvel of industrial design that looks like an aerial photograph of farmland, trees, homes, bodies of water, and other topographical features. Upon closer inspection, the material reveals itself. It is printed circuit boards and rivets arranged to evoke a loftiness. The material transcends its original purpose in an elegant computer-age Dadaist fashion. It poses the question: does technology (bio)mimic nature or does technology shape nature?

An artwork in the “John Doe Co.” section that directly interacts with that question is a pedal-powered machine called *Organic Visualizer/Assembler* (1970–2016). It is motorized and rotates on an axis independently. An outside force (in this case, human weight) causes LED lights and fluorescent UV fixtures to flicker, illuminating the various decorations of the cylinder in motion behind glass. Our steps illuminate a cowrie shell or other material details.

Perhaps, anachronistically, it makes my mind return to a previous section of the exhibition whereby two rocks are attached to a stereograph marking their communication with each other in *Rock Communication Indicator* (1983). Do rocks carry frequencies among each other or is the possibility of this simply an alluring idea? Also, it brings back the specimens inside a shed that you can walk through. Simultaneously evoking garage fix-it culture, greenhouses (a life-sized shed of a greenhouse is one of the reclaimed materials), and a “cabinet of curiosities,” this shed is the *Avocado Laboratory* (1998–2004). The “cabinet of curiosities” form came through the display method of avocado pits, resin, plastic, metal, and toothpick sculptures on polycarbonate shelves.

The magnum opus of the show, created as a site-specific installation, a sand piece called *Human Landscapes—Imaginary Landscapes 1* (2025), was at the end. While this work uses a mechanized process, it is a more complex version of the artist’s hand or someone drawing in and making sandcastles. Clusters of sand mounds gathered together alongside futuristic patterns of lines and dots, indents, or pathways marked the castles. This large-scale work could only be done through movement (circumambulation and squatting). When I stood on one end of the work, I saw someone opposite me angle their body and crouch down on the floor to see the sand piece. The softness of the sand was in contrast to the concrete floor, the contraption used to make the world that we were looking down into called *Art Tool: Rake 924* (2024), and the tallness of the room with a remnant warehouse-like

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*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

ceiling. It made me notice the details but also my surroundings. A prospective shift probing: "Ants to You, Gods to Who?" was in effect.

The show emphasizes technological and natural agency, which in no way imbues either with supremacy. They work in symbiosis. For example, a vinyl quote elucidates this concept. It reads, "Breakdown repair, breakdown, repair, !@#%&^\*@\$#@# Whoops, I have to treat it like my loving relationship with my cats. 'How are you feeling today, my purring machine?'- John Doe Co., 'Out-of-Order Technology,' 1975." Comparing machines to purring cats emphasizes the animate aspects of both beings. *Supply and Demand* (1972), a Venus flytrap enclosed in a plastic case with a humidifier and grow lamp, embodies the natural and artificial worlds working in harmony. The Venus flytrap (which I know from experience is a fickle plant—it can even die if distilled water isn't used for houseplant varieties) thrives in its terrarium that provides ample lighting and humidity for it. In turn, the technology is given a purpose by nurturing and caring for this living plant, and the grass surrounding it is plastic, imperceptible to the natural eye.

What's significant about a junk bricolage exhibition in Philly is that the city is a gritty, industrial detritus wonderland. Upon turning the corner from the museum is an alley with broken wooden pallets, and closer to Fishtown, where I live, on the stretch of North Delaware Avenue, car parts, liquor bottles, rubble, and construction remnants lie on the side of the road like roadkill or organic and abundant like weeds. Reframing perspective to see these things this way feels like itching just the right spot in the brain because these objects hold the potential of being art/art materials.

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