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A. Danieli, Fidel. "Carl Cheng," March 1968.

Within terms of recent widespread interest in box constructions, Cheng's objects could be reasonably accepted as sculpture. To support this claim he includes vacuum-formed volumes in his plexiglas enclosures and has done a series of mechano-humans cast in bas relief. But it is wiser to understand that he is a photographer with an industrial orientation and thus a more reasonable approach is to understand his work as elaborately and originally mounted and framed photos.

In mood his entire body of work is decidedly serious and evidently pessimistic, for his choice of subject matter is single-minded in form and treatment. A singular basic theme is the mechanical volumes of cars, trailers, dirigibles, balloons and such circular framing devices as tunnel archways and the windows of cars. In his strictly two-dimensional montages these objects are cut out, sectioned, and remounted. The situations are immediately recognizable, but edited and re-composed, flattened out to symbolic potential. The images are placed onto long roadways, set into landscapes, or up against full cloud groups that move swiftly back to infinity, but through sharp value control he produces a narrowing of space. As with a telephoto lens effect, Cheng forces the montages to convey a singular malaise—the loneliness and panic of the open road or of open space pulled close and made oppressive by his bulbous tank-like subjects.

Equally potent are his multiple views of a single negative developed through a tonal range in exactly controlled darkroom processing. They point up the factual, repeatable nature of the photo but, just as importantly, an equally basic quality we largely ignore, the mutable factor of key control. From the suggestiveness of a barely resolved tracery to the smoggy density of high middle value, to the somber and stark contrasts of low dark, each stage reads as a different image causing an entirely different set of associations to be aroused. Side by side, the test strips combine to reveal the subjectiveness which can affect the interpretation of mechanically rendered but manipulated data. Another montage presents various views of a walking elderly man shown in various

positions in space. As in a Muybridge or Marey motion study, or a Flemish primitive's simultaneous compression of a religious narrative, the abundance of sequential material composed into one unity confounds reason yet eerily enchants by seeming plausible.

In the sculptures, simple boxes preserve the spatial arrangements of bleached and dyed photos. All of Cheng's images are distant yet realistic. Gas trucks on a bleak highway, wheelchair patients, a stilled balloon seller, junked cars and hanging carcasses are all related as equally depressing, ponderous, and previously or potentially mobile volumes. Each photo is sealed between the halves of a vacuum-molded plastic shape that follows the contours of the subjects and is paired to bow outward in front and back. The subjects are bagged and preserved as surely as produce from the frozen food counter and just as compressed and airless. The surface of the molded plastic is protected from touch by the clear box and picks up reflections of light which play across the invisibly clear protrusions, adding a tangible volumetric sense and at the same time rendering the pale photos hallucinatory. Numerous primitive peoples are reported to believe the camera steals the soul. Whatever soul Cheng's objects possessed is distilled to an encapsulated, weightless silence. ■

Philip Martin Gallery