

SUNSET BOULEVARD — A SHOPPING GUIDE

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—Kathi Norklun

Carl Cheng is best known for his installations, like “Black Lake” at ARCO last summer: a pool with a black bottom, a white grid over it reflecting into the depths, and a simple device for creating ripples on the surface. He is fascinated by the processes of nature – especially the nuances of water, that most precious of commodities in L.A. This sensibility carries over into his John Doe Co. productions. The company was originally formed out of frustration over the lack of replies from companies manufacturing supplies Cheng wanted to test. John Doe Co. took on a life of its own, producing art works that are something between office machines and participatory science exhibits. The products of a decade are collected here for the first time. Flip a switch to “maestro,” pick up the baton and conduct an array of electric meters, switch to “automatic” and the needles no longer obey your commands, but those of some unseen force. There is a typewriter that prints only punctuation marks (something enlightening about that) and a series of “alternative TVs” once installed in Berkeley bookstores television sets housing fish tanks. Many of the pieces shown here were responses to specific locations done while travelling, partly to relieve the feeling of being a tourist in places like Bali and Shanghai. One compartmentalized box, like a Duchampian valise, is filled with oddities (the nameable ones include

Philip Martin Gallery

poison red berries and dried fish). On the wall above the glass-covered array is a case of artist-made implements. It's like an anthropological exhibit in some musty old natural history museum, the objects a cross between curious and ethnographic data. Also in the exhibition is a large-scale installation, or laboratory, for producing ripple patterns on a pool surface, which are reflected onto a screen. This work also allows viewer participation with, for example, bulbs to squeeze to release droplets of water from the roof of the tent that houses the project. Cheng's fascination with the natural world is contagious. The work is being shown along with large, light paintings graffiti'd with symbols and marks by Ford Crull. At Stella Polaris Gallery, Boyd St., downtown.