

Philip Martin Gallery

Pagel, David. "L.A. Artist Carl Cheng's darkly amusing supply kits for the apocalypse," *Los Angeles Times*, July 5, 2016.

Los Angeles Times

When Andy Warhol called his studio the Factory in 1962, he put an end to the romantic idea that artists labored alone in garrets where they poured their souls into works that would be misunderstood, if not completely ignored, by the general public.

Los Angeles artist Carl Cheng took Warhol's proposition a step further in 1967, when he started a business and began presenting his functional sculptures as if they were products designed, manufactured and distributed by the John Doe Co.

At Cherry and Martin in Los Angeles, John Doe Co.'s incisive items are the highlights of Cheng's wickedly brilliant exhibition "Nature Is Everything — Everything Is Nature." His first solo show in Los Angeles since 1998 is an elegantly illuminated showroom filled with beautifully made objects for discerning consumers who plan to live through the apocalypse — and bring a bit of nature with them.

"Emergency Nature Supply Kit" (1971) is a pyramid-shaped carrying case, about the size of a purse, that opens to reveal an approximately 1-inch-square patch of grass. It's accompanied by a sound-activated recording of chirping birds and a short black-and-white film in which a woman dressed in tinfoil carries the case into Tokyo's subway system.

"Supply & Demand" (1972) is an even more elaborate micro-environment. Atop a pedestal grows a miniature version of a suburban lawn. On it rests a diorama-size biosphere. A flexible tube connects its two plastic chambers. In the first, fly eggs become larvae, pupae and adults. In the second, they become breakfast, lunch and dinner for half a dozen Venus flytraps — hopefully, after the flies have laid their eggs and maintained the equilibrium between supply and demand, life and death.

In these darkly whimsical works, genres collapse: Landscape meets still life by way of memento mori.

Four examples of John Doe Co.'s "Erosion Machine" (1969) mimic nature by allowing consumers to construct, erode and display their own sedimentary rocks. Part microwave and part dishwasher, this ingenious invention is sci-fi sculpture at its best: 99% preposterous but too chilling in its realism to dismiss.

Four examples of "Specimen Viewer" (1970) and a trio of 3-D photographs resemble objects that might be found in a photo album on a space station. Their X-ray format suggests nuclear contamination.

Cheng's exhibition captures the tenor of our times, when droughts, nukes and global warming put the Earth at risk and we, as a species, have responded in an ad hoc, piecemeal and absurdly inadequate manner.