

Ching Ho Cheng: A Reintroduction

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Ching Ho Cheng, *The Chemical Garden*, 1968, watercolour and ink on rag paper, 74.9 x 74.9 cm. Courtesy of the estate of the artist.

The story of Ching Ho Ching (1946-1989) is important to those who are interested in the broader story of contemporary Chinese art. While he has not received constant attention since his death in New York City, efforts are being made to reintroduce him into the art world. Along with the conceptual photographer Tseng Kwong Chi, he is one of the very first artists from the Chinese diaspora to receive recognition in the United States during the 1970s. Indeed, he is someone whose very presence as an artist broke new ground, and he needs to be reinstated into the history of his time, partly because he belonged to a tumultuous, experimental era now being increasingly documented, but more importantly because his achievement, independent in its nature, has been neglected. His art ranges from sharply detailed psychedelia, to startlingly original representational gouache pieces, to works that have been deliberately torn, to paintings coated with iron oxide. The overt diversity within Cheng's work characterizes him as a restlessly inventive artist, as someone who was himself constantly changing.

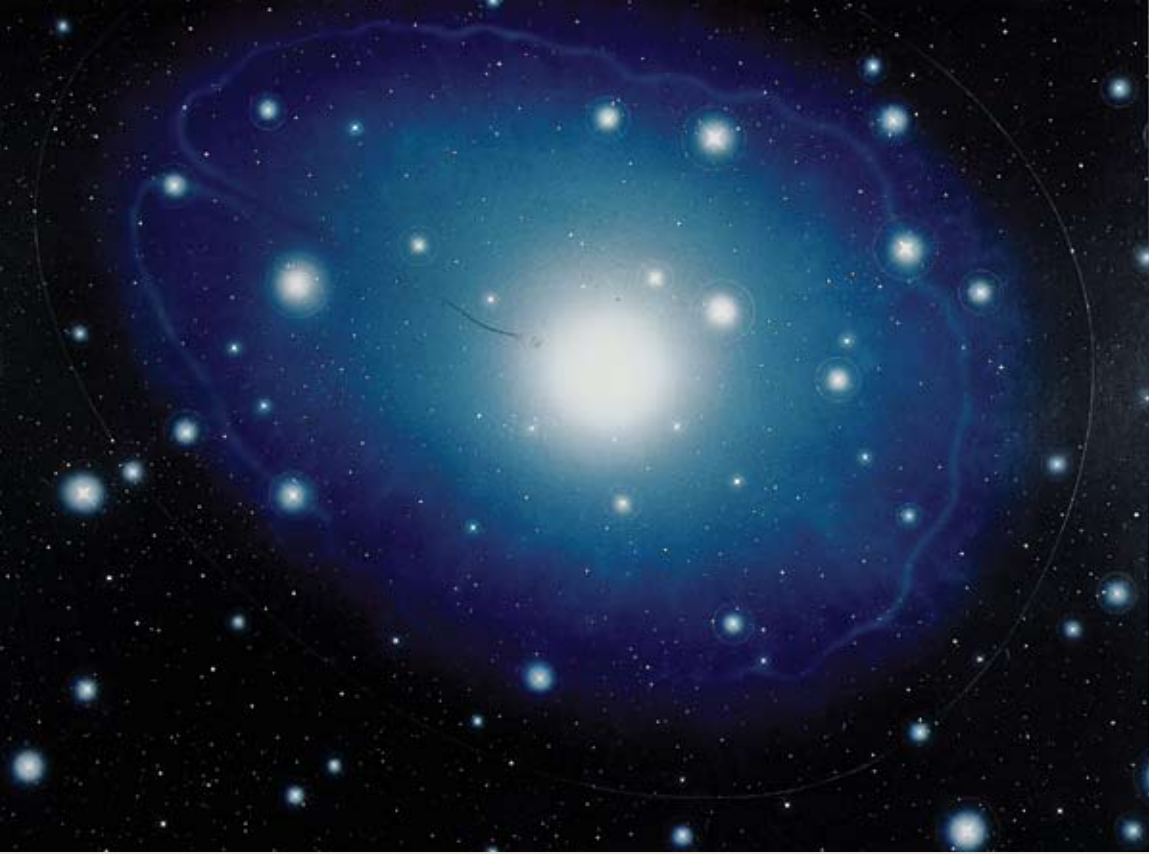
Currently, contemporary Asian art, especially the art of mainland China, is enjoying critical success and an inflated market, it becomes even more important to connect earlier figures to present practices, so that historical continuity is established. Cheng's accomplishments remind us that a few original, pioneering figures established a precedent that would be taken up relatively quickly by other Asian artists; sadly, this would only take place after the passing of Cheng and

Tseng, both of whom died of AIDS. Now that nearly twenty years have passed since the death of Cheng, perhaps it is a little easier to contextualize his achievements. Presently we are accustomed to artists originating from all regions of the world, but not so long ago, indeed during the time of Cheng's active career, the art world was more homogeneous; Asian artists were relatively rare. It is also important to remember that Cheng belonged to the downtown New York scene that enabled him to meet famous performing artists such as David Bowie, Lou Reed, and the Rolling Stones. The late 1960s and early 1970s comprise a period of explosive change in social mores and culture. Cheng belonged to that period, whose various insurgencies—in civil rights, women's rights, and alternative culture—resulted in multifaceted creativity. By taking part in that general upheaval, he must have been deeply influenced by the rebelliousness of those current events.

Cheng came from an accomplished family. His father, born in 1900 in Guangzhou, had relatives who were mayors, governors, and judges in Shanghai and Guangzhou. Educated in Paris, where he studied at the Sorbonne, Cheng's father spent many years in Europe, eventually becoming fluent in French, English, and German. After working for the League of Nations for several years, he returned to China, where, in the 1940s, just after the war, the government offered him the post of Ambassador to Cuba. Cheng was born in 1946 in Havana; according to his sister Sybao Cheng-Wilson, "It was an idyllic life of servants—nannies, cooks, and chauffeurs."¹ Cheng's mother was her husband's second wife; considerably younger than him, she was very creative in knitting, embroidery, and design. In 1951, when Cheng was five years old, his family relocated to New York due to the Communist takeover in China. His father went on to work for the United Nations for several years, while his mother began her own fashion-design business, for which she both imported and created clothing for such stores as Bergdorf Goodman and Saks Fifth Avenue.

Even as a small child, Cheng showed talent in art. He painted suns, moons, and pyramids—symbolic emblems that belied the youth of the artist (he would take up the symbolism again when he became an adult). At the age of fourteen, he won an art competition with an oil portrait of his sister. After rejecting the chance to study at a private school, Cheng attended Forest Hills High School in Queens. He applied to, and won, scholarships from the New York City art schools Cooper Union and Pratt Institute, choosing the former perhaps because it was downtown, close to alternative music sites like the Electric Circus and Fillmore East. He spent the years 1964-68 studying at Cooper Union, where his majors were painting and sculpture. In 1971 he exhibited for the first time at the Cooper Hewitt Museum; five years later he had his first one-person show in Amsterdam, at Kunsthandel K276. He lived in Europe for periods of time, often returning to New York, where he always stayed at the Chelsea Hotel (his sister comments, "He loved the artistic energy of the Chelsea"). In 1977 he had his first solo exhibition in New York at the Gloria Cortella Gallery. Although his early works possessed a psychedelic aesthetic, for this show he exhibited his gouache works of "painted light" and he sold several pieces to celebrities.

In the eye-boggling imagery of *The Chemical Garden* (1968), Cheng's viewers are confronted with a resolutely psychedelic vision, as the title of the painting implies. Done in watercolour and ink on rag paper, *The Chemical Garden* consists of a lizard-like face with human teeth and blue eyes in the centre of the composition; it is framed by a large intestine, at the end of which is a multi-lobed blue flower. Surrounding the intestine, at the bottom of the painting, are small, pinkish, tadpole-like shapes that transform into larger forms that remind one of amoebas. Throughout the outer edges of the painting are also white rod shapes crowding about; viewers sense that this is a drug-inspired vision, one that sees beauty in the cells and organs of the body. Today *The Chemical Garden* looks somewhat dated, but its specificity of form and strange mystical appearance make



Ching Ho Cheng, *Motherlode*, 1979, watercolour on rag board, 97.7 x 109.2 cm. Courtesy of the estate of the artist.

it a work of continuing interest, even as a period piece. Cheng claimed that his psychedelic work demonstrated a Tibetan influence. As a disciplined artist who worked eight hours a day, he demonstrates here a combination of diligence and passion, characteristics that would surface in his later works.

Cheng's sister asserts that he was an American with a European sensibility, the latter due to their father's influence. In 1980, he had an exhibition, *Intimate Illuminations*, at the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, New York. An exhibition of traditional Chinese art took place at the museum at the same time as Cheng's. In response to the two shows, the artist had the following to say: "Regardless of whether you like one over the other or both, the contrast should be quite interesting. One of the basic differences is that I've never been traditionally Chinese; I've always been an outsider in the Chinese community. But I suppose that because I rebel against tradition, I don't believe that great art is traditional." Cheng rather typically dismisses the conservative element of the Chinese legacy in art, and it is clear, from both the statement and Cheng's work, that he saw himself as a maverick, an "outsider" who would find his own way within the labyrinth of the art world. In fact, there is very little, if any, reference made to Chinese culture in his work. Cheng was, like many strong artists, an independent person who valued autonomy above all else; his sense of self-determination enabled him to construct an aesthetic that was entirely his own.

It is possible to understand Cheng's self-reliance in work done around the time of the *Intimate Illuminations* exhibition. In 1978, he painted the gouache (on rag board) entitled *Motherlode*, a medium-sized study of a night sky, complete with smaller stars circling around a central sphere of bright light with its own penumbra. The feeling of the painting is one of mysticism, in which a visionary identification between the artist and his subject allows him to compellingly portray another reality. The aura of the painting mysteriously makes itself evident, as if he and his viewers were actually looking into the darkness and its cosmic illumination. Light itself becomes Cheng's theme; his sister points out that "his work was about contemplation and about self-transformation." Similar to Vija Celmin's remarkable night sky series, *Motherlode* exists as a kind

of prophecy intent on valuing what is seen as something intensely sacred, best approached with respect and indeed reverence for the spiritual beginnings of all things. The awareness, then, of relationships that might well be termed sacred is central to Cheng's art. The night sky, punctuated by spheres of light, becomes a context for remaining attentive to the holistic implications of his vision, what his sister calls "our total life cycle." At the same time, the painting relies on a self-determining point of view, in which it is up to the viewer to take on the responsibility of seeing clearly.

Another mid-sized gouache, also on rag paper, reflects Cheng's preoccupation with visual phenomena. This untitled painting consists of a wide composition completed in blue. To the left there is a dark-blue shadow that runs along the vertical edge of the work; this darker blue then stretches across the horizontal edge at the top of the composition. Toward the bottom of the gouache, there is a thinner dark-blue shadow that extends sideways. While the



Ching Ho Cheng, *Untitled (Window Series)*, 1982, gouache on rag paper, 55.2 x 100.9 cm. Courtesy of the estate of the artist.

painting can be read as abstract, it is more clearly a representation of a window frame. Cheng was living in the Chelsea Hotel when he painted this work; he used the living room of a very small one-bedroom apartment as his studio which had southern light. Cheng would go on to do a series of these window frames in different colours. This particular piece is brilliantly effective in its nearly abstract treatment of an actual structure that can be seen. With these works, he began to move toward an increasingly non-objective approach, one that would culminate in his torn works of paper, whose effectiveness depended on Cheng's thoroughly intuitive actions. Ripping a piece of paper was not a technique that he could entirely control, therefore the undertaking introduced an element of chance that revealed a certain spontaneity.

In an article written by art historian Gert Schiff, it is stated that: "Cheng . . . always had a passion for ancient ruins, tablets, tombs, steles, and stone codices and calendars."² Indeed, in an interview he claimed that ancient and aboriginal cultures motivated him in his dedicated search for a reality that would inspire his art: "I feel very strongly for the Navaho, the Zuni, the Hopi, the Tibetans, the Egyptians. I feel all their energy."³ On his return from Turkey he worked out the shapes of archeological materials—pieces of clay, pieces of buildings—that allowed him to transform some of his experiences with archaic Turkish culture into an abiding set of forms. Schiff indicates that Cheng's method of tearing paper came about after he ripped apart a drawing he was unhappy with.⁴ Cheng's forms of ripped paper, which give the sense of monumentality no matter what the size of the composition, do not necessarily reflect a reference to landscape,—an association he denied. Instead, he emphasized the spontaneous nature of the tear itself, which resulted in an open-ended composition ruled by chance. By tearing first, before covering the shapes with such media as charcoal, pastel, and graphite, the artist emphasized the process and its uninfluenced accomplishments rather than a finished work of art (like many artists working at that time, Cheng was deeply involved with procedures and methods of process).

With a piece like *The Certainty of Blue* (1984), Cheng's viewers immediately respond to the torn rag paper and its four shapes: a dark blue, mountainous shape on the bottom; an organically edged area of white above it; a black piece of paper whose lower edge is at one with the top of the white area; and a strip overlaying the black ground, covered with a blue colour whose spareness in

some areas allows one to see through to the white ground. Here it is easy to understand Cheng's repudiation of such art as landscape-oriented in appearance—he seems to be addressing issues of pure abstraction. The simplicity of the composition does not take away Cheng's sophistication as an artist; one sees the piece, like the work mentioned above, as a step in an ongoing, continuous exploration of the self, as well as an investigation of the random effects of the procedure. In *The Cloud* (1988), a much larger torn-paper work done in collaboration with the poet David Rattray, Cheng's tearing method has divided two equally sized pieces of rag paper, onto which the artist has copied the poet's lines. Cheng called these pieces "interrupted texts," and Rattray's notes indicate that he felt as though he was writing on the sky while working together with the artist. In *The Cloud* we see a deep crevice-like cut in the centre of the composition, with Rattray's words on either side of the white valley. It is a powerful piece of art whose collaborators are equally important, with the text cursively written and continuing across the void from the left to right sides of the work. The collaborative efforts resulted in four poems being treated in a way similar to *The Cloud*.



Ching Ho Cheng, *Certainty of Blue IX*, 1984, charcoal, graphite and pastel on torn rag paper, 97.7 x 127 cm. Courtesy of the estate of the artist.

A final innovation realized by Cheng is a method whereby paper was treated with gesso, iron, or copper powder, which was then oxidized in a pool of vinegar water to create actual rust. The glowing tones of Cheng's works point out his astute creativity, and his commitment to works that transparently reveal the decisions he made to create them. In an untitled piece from 1988, iron oxide and acrylic create a strikingly textured surface whose abstract inferences nearly outweigh the design itself. Here Cheng has made a dark-green ovoid, much like an egg, that occupies the composition's upper left, while above it is a gold ground on the left and a greenish silver patch on the right, the latter making its way to the bottom of the painting. On the lower right there is the copper ground again; the gestalt of the work is very accomplished and owes its appeal to modernist practice. An earlier work, *Grotto* (1986), which consists of iron oxide on torn rag paper, combines Cheng's experiments with tearing materials and with oxidizing their surface.



Ching Ho Cheng, *The Cloud*, 1988, ink on torn rag paper, 127 x 267.9 cm. Collaboration with David Rattray. Photo: William Duke. Courtesy of the estate of the artist.

Grotto embodies an odd shape, with a main trunk-like form curving back in on itself to the right, so that there is an open space or loophole in the center. The eccentricity of its overall outline makes the work extremely interesting, especially with its title, which allows a reading of the apparently abstract form as belonging to nature. Again and again, in Cheng's work we see him experimenting and discovering—and operating far ahead of his time.

A final point about the artist's life and career: racial and sexual identity issues simply didn't concern him. He always worked with archetypal, or collective, images in mind. As his sister puts it, "There is an unspoken message in Cheng's paintings that he shares with you about life. It is beyond being global, it is universal." His work meant everything to him, and he hoped that after his death his art would continue to be collected by major museums such as the Museum of Modern Art. By



Ching Ho Cheng, *Alchemical Process*, 1988, iron oxide on paper. Courtesy of the estate of the artist.



Ching Ho Cheng, *Untitled*, 1988, iron oxide and acrylic on canvas, 66 x 77.2 cm. Courtesy of the estate of the artist.

refusing to be categorized, and by turning his position as an outsider into one of creative rebellion, Cheng clearly kept his distance from making art about identity. What resulted, instead, is an art of remarkable autonomy and accomplishment, one that elaborates the artist's long search for a spiritual realm. Cheng's eclecticism, part of the mores of his time, also shows us just how far he was willing to go in search of cultural precedents that he could use in his art. His strong sense of discipline comes through to his audience even though he is a process-oriented artist; for this reason, he is a true original.

Notes

1. I am indebted to Sybao Cheng-Wilson for all biographical materials, which she related to me in a series of written responses to my questions.
2. Gert Schiff, "Torn Together," *ArtForum*, January 1983, 82-85.
3. Yaacov Kohn, "A Conversation: Ching Ho Cheng." *Soho Weekly News*, January 27, 1977, 21-23.
4. Schiff, p. 84.