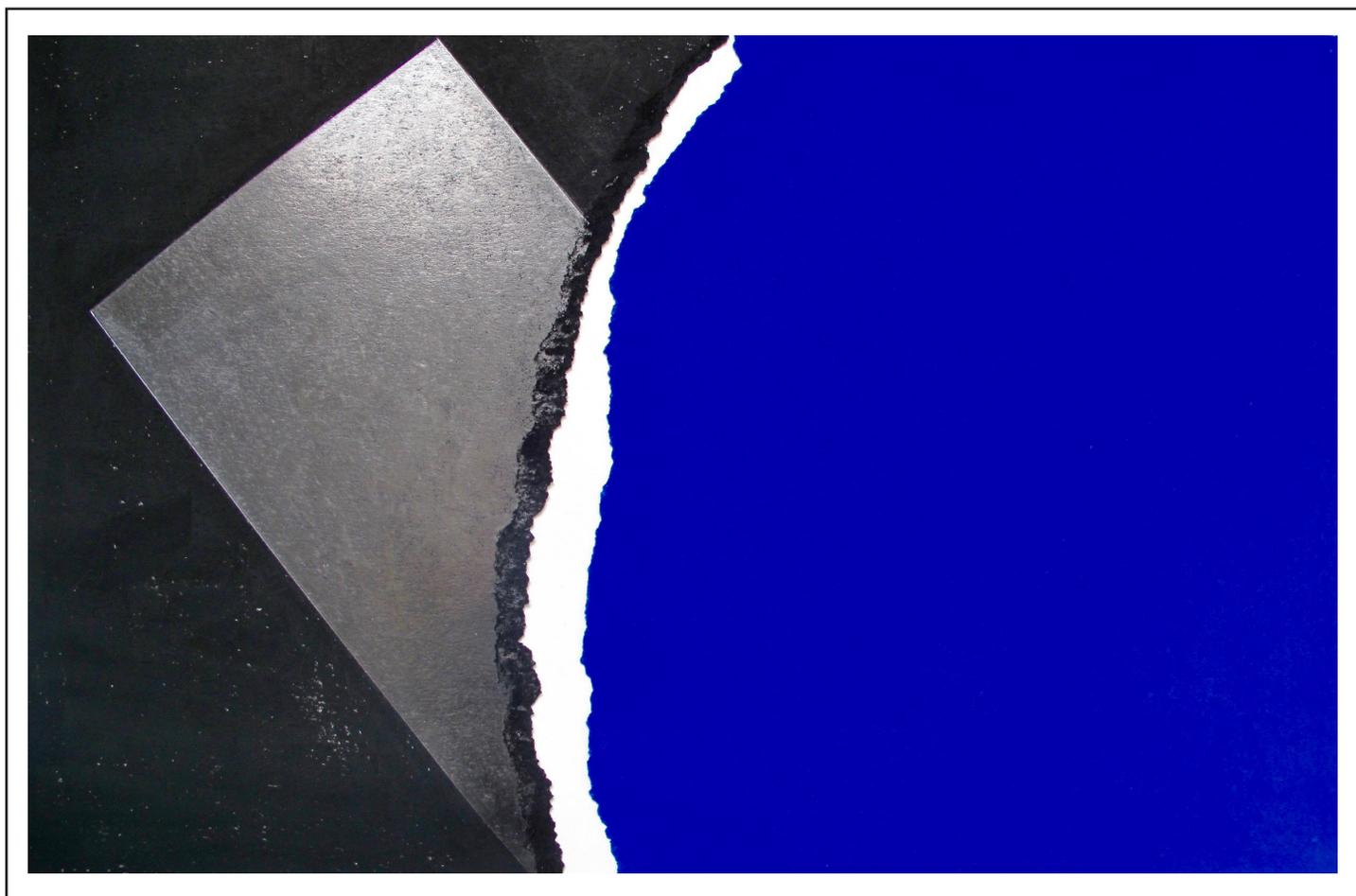


CHING HO CHENG

THE MINUTE WITH THE INFINITE,
EVOICATIONS OF THE ARTIST



SHEPHERD
W & K
GALLERIES

CHING HO CHENG

THE MINUTE WITH THE INFINITE,
EVOICATIONS OF THE ARTIST

Exhibition organized by
Robert Kashey and David Wojciechowski

Catalog by
Kaitlin Anne Vervoort

SHEPHERD
W & K
GALLERIES

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FRONT COVER ILLUSTRATION: Ching Ho Cheng, *Untitled (Blue and Black Torn Work)*, 1985, cat. no. 6

BACK COVER PHOTO: Ching Ho Cheng in his apartment at the Chelsea Hotel, Suite 1016, holding an airbrush, circa 1979. Photographer Unknown, Courtesy of the Ching Ho Cheng Estate, 2022

GRAPHIC DESIGN: Kaitlin Anne Vervoort

TECHNICAL NOTES: All measurements are in inches and centimeters, height precedes width. All drawings and paintings are framed. Prices available upon request. All works subject to prior sale.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: We are very grateful to Sybao Cheng-Wilson, director of the Ching Ho Cheng Estate, for her commitment to the in-depth exploration and organization of Ching's legacy, which has made this dossier possible.

- R.K. / D.W.

INTRODUCTION

Nearing the 33rd anniversary of Ching Ho Cheng's (1946 – 1989) death, this dossier and accompanying exhibition aim to refocus the art and career of this transformative artist (see figure 1). In an attempt to recontextualize Cheng's work as the creative outlet of the artist himself as opposed to emphasizing his American, Chinese, or Asian-American identity, or focusing on his religion or sexuality, it is crucial that we revert back to the words of Cheng and his contemporaries. This is not to say that his national identity, spirituality, or gender politics and sexuality do not matter, quite the contrary. This is an endeavor to explain Cheng's art as he described it, rather than by our own present-day interpretations.

In the years since his death the artistic life and work of Ching Ho Cheng continue to garner further reappraisal and reconsideration. In June of 2021, on the fortieth anniversary of the first report published by the US Centers for Disease Control to mention an illness which would shortly be defined as AIDS, David Zwirner exhibited a series of simultaneous exhibitions under the title *More Life* that featured eight different artists at various international locations including New York. Each of these exhibitions represented artists, including Ching Ho Cheng¹, “whose lives were cut short by HIV/AIDS-related complications during approximately the first twenty years of the epidemic.”²



Figure 1. Ching Ho Cheng working in his apartment in the Chelsea Hotel, 1979. Photo by Barry Schapiro. Courtesy Ching Ho Cheng Estate, 2022.

In 2022, on the 100th anniversary of the Phillips Collection of Washington D.C., the museum asked 12 artists to “reimagine the Phillips centennial logo in their own style.”³ For the month of October 2022, the artist Julia Chon, also known as Kimchi Juice, included illustrations of five Asian-American artists in her redesign of the Phillips logo, among them Ching Ho Cheng (see figures 2 and 3).

With each year that Cheng acquires further attention one must pay dues to his sister Sybao Cheng-Wilson, the director of the Ching Ho Cheng Estate, who has promoted Cheng's work with great determination and purpose since 1989 (see figure 4). The Shepherd W & K Galleries are proud to once again champion Cheng with the cooperation of the Ching Ho Cheng Estate as we have over the last 40 years. This will be the fifth installment of Ching Ho Cheng exhibitions at the Shepherd Gallery following exhibitions in 1982, 1985, 2008, and 2015.⁴

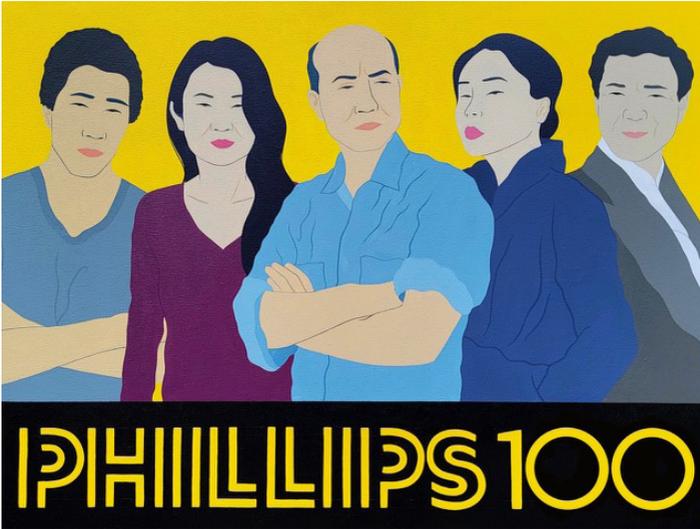


Figure 2. Kimchi Juice (Julia Chen), *Phillips 100 Logo*, 2022. Courtesy Phillips Collection, Washington DC, 2022.



Figure 3. Kimchi Juice (Julia Chen), *Phillips 100 Logo*, 2022. Courtesy Phillips Collection, Washington DC, 2022.

Reviewed during his lifetime in publications such as *Art in America*, *Arts Magazine*, *ArtForum*, *Opus International*, and *The New York Times*, Cheng's art impressed upon many in the art world his expert skill, fresh eye, and "fascination with extreme states of perception."⁵ The brilliance of Ching Ho Cheng lies not with his technical ability alone, it is his "way of seeing" as well that set him apart from his peers and continues to amass critical attention to this day. Cheng left his work open to various readings. In 1980, he wrote, "The meaning is for the beholder to discover."⁶ Thus, the viewer is able to interpret these works with their own knowledge and experience. Similarly, Cheng believed reaching an audience unfamiliar with art was a privilege: "one of my greatest pleasures is to touch people who know nothing about art."⁷

Making art was for Cheng part of his life force, without that ability, he would have been debilitated physically and emotionally. He related his capability to create art to his biological potential to create life, "To me my paintings are my testicles. If I didn't paint, I'd feel castrated. Because I feel really strong when I do something that I think is beautiful. It makes me feel very strong inside."⁸ In around 1973, Cheng turned to his sister and proclaimed that without the ability to paint he would lose the will to live. Painting and creating embodied who Cheng was and how he will be remembered in years to come.

In 1946 Ching Ho Cheng was born to a highly respected Chinese diplomatic family stationed in Havana, Cuba. His father moved the family to New York in 1951, settling in Kew Gardens, Queens. In 1964 Cheng started his first year at The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art working under painters Nicholas Krushenick (1929 - 1999), Richard Anuskiewicz (1930 - 2020), and Michael Goldberg (1924 - 2007). It was also during these years that Cheng became interested in the teachings of Tao-te-ching and Taoism. After graduating in 1968 he started to make work that became part of his first of four major artistic periods, his early work, what he referred to as "Epic" painting, also called "Psychedelics."⁹ This lasted from 1969 until 1973 when he shifted his focus away from "explosions"¹⁰ and towards "subtlety."¹¹ In an interview in 1977, Cheng reflected on that transition saying, "Once I was attracted by 'Epic' painting, but now

that does not interest me. I find great beauty in very simple things.”¹² The next decade (1973 – 1982) was what art historian Gert Schiff (1926 – 1990)¹³ called a “process of gradual purification.”¹⁴ This second period is known as the “Gouache” period, which focused on everyday objects such as matches, light bulbs, and peaches. By the end of this period Cheng had distilled his work down to the essence of light and shadow. The third period, known as the “Torn Works” spanned from 1982 until 1986 when Cheng started to experiment with torn gessoed paper and iron and copper powder. These latest works from 1986 until his death in 1989, marked Cheng’s fourth and final period, the “Alchemical Works.”



Figure 4. Sybao and Ching Ho Cheng on the way to Studio 54, New York, circa 1978. Photographer unknown. Courtesy Ching Ho Cheng Estate, 2022.

This dossier presents work from each of these four periods, “the Psychedelics, Gouache, Torn Works, and Alchemical Works.”¹⁵ *Study for “Astral Theatre,”* circa

1972 (cat. no. 1), *Portrait of Tally Brown, Design for a Poster for the Continental Baths Christmas Show*, 1972 (cat. no. 2), and *Portrait of Sybao, the Artist’s Sister*, circa 1972 (cat. no. 3), all originate from the end of the “Psychedelic” period. *Untitled (Shadow Box Series)*, 1984 (cat. no. 5) is one of the later works from the “Gouache” period. Two works in this dossier come from the third category, the “Torn Works,” *Untitled (Prism or UFO Series)*, 1982 (cat. no. 4) and *Untitled (Blue & Black Torn Work)*, 1985 (cat. no. 6). Of the fourth and final period, the “Alchemical Works,” the dossier concludes with *Untitled (Alchemical Work)*, 1987 (cat. no. 7).

Endnotes

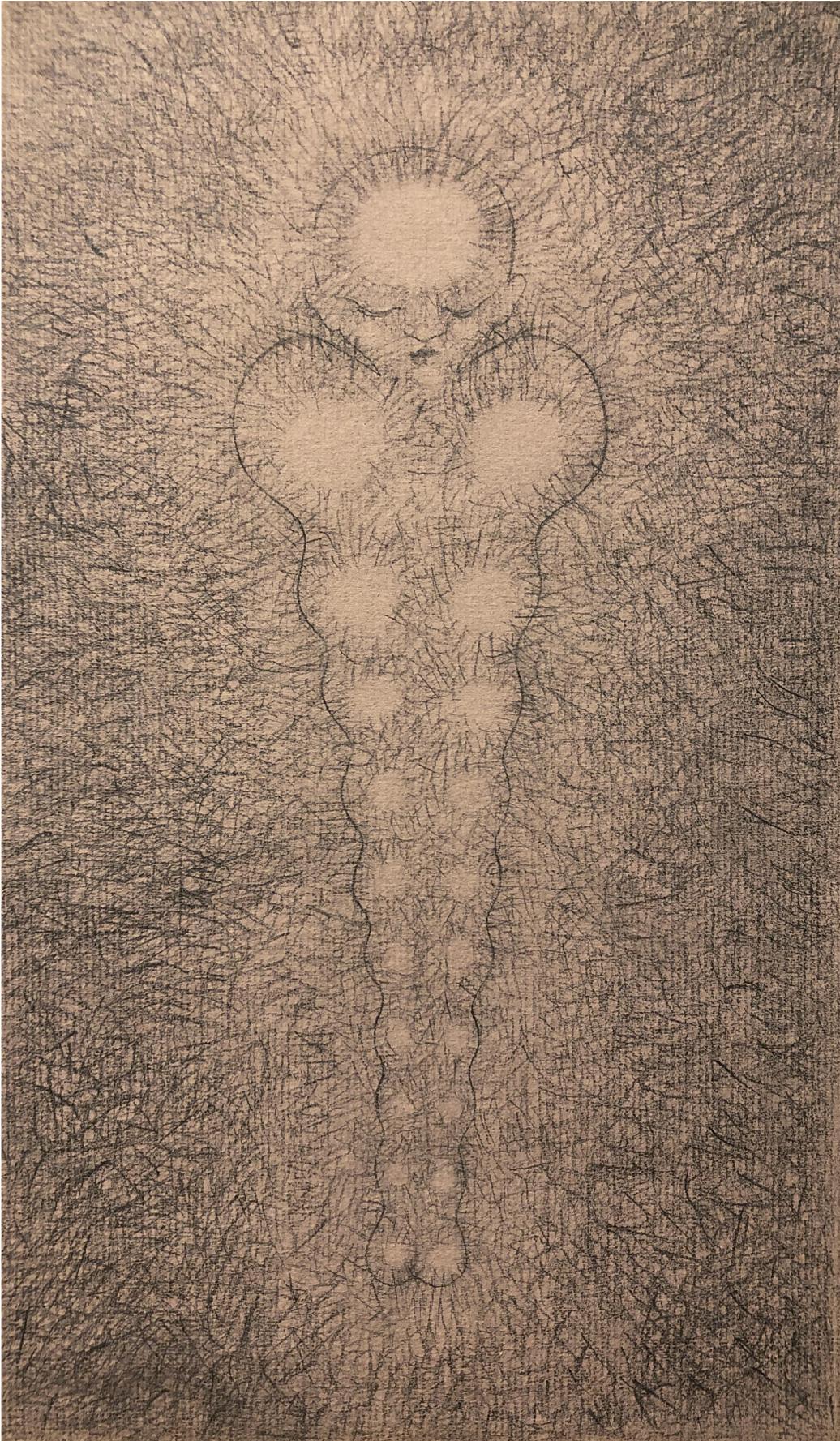
- 1 David Zwirner Gallery, "Ching Ho Cheng: More Life," *More Life - Ching Ho Cheng* | David Zwirner, 2021, <https://www.davidzwirner.com/exhibitions/2021/more-life/ching-ho-cheng>.
- 2 David Zwirner Gallery, "More Life," *More Life* | David Zwirner, 2021, <https://www.davidzwirner.com/exhibitions/2021/more-life>.
- 3 The Phillips Collection, "Our Logo Reimagined," *Our Logo Reimagined* | *The Phillips Collection*, 2022, <https://www.phillipscollection.org/our-logo-reimagined>.
- 4 Exhibitions at the Shepherd Gallery: *Ching Ho Cheng: New Works on Paper*, 1982; *Ching Ho Cheng: 20 Drawings*, 1985; *Ching Ho Cheng: A Retrospective*, 2008; *Ching Ho Cheng: The Five Elements*, 2015. Visit <https://shepherdgallery.com/> for more information.
- 5 Henry Geldzahler, "Studio Visit: Ching Ho Cheng," *Contemporanea* 1, no. 4 (November/December 1988): 84.
- 6 Ching Ho Cheng, April 7, 1980, quoted in Everson Museum of Art, "Exhibitions - Ching Ho Cheng: Intimate Illuminations," *Everson Museum of Art Bulletin*, June 1980. Emphasis mine.
- 7 Ching Ho Cheng quoted in Gregory Millard, "Forward," in *Ching Ho Cheng: New Paintings 1978-1979* (New York: GHJ Graphics Inc, 1978), n.p. Gregory B. Millard was a noted poet and playwright who was appointed assistant commissioner for program services in the Department of Cultural affairs by Mayor Edward I. Koch. Millard also worked on the radio and on TV in Washington. He was the general manager and cofounder of the WPFW-FM radio-station starting in 1977. For a Washington TV station, WTOP-TV, Millard wrote and narrated "For My People" a documentary about poets in the Harlem renaissance. Millard's documentary won the George Foster Peabody award in 1975.
- 8 Ching Ho Cheng quoted in Jaakov Kohn, "A Conversation: Ching Ho Cheng," *The SoHo Weekly News*, January 27, 1977, 21–23, republished in its entirety on the Ching Ho Cheng Estate website, <https://www.chingho-cheng.com/artist-interview>.
- 9 Sybao Cheng-Wilson, "Infinity in a Peach Pit: My Brother's Quest for the Eternal," in *Ching Ho Cheng: More Life*, curator, Simon Wu (New York: Ching Ho Cheng Estate, 2021), 5, exh. cat.
- 10 Ching Ho Cheng, quoted in Gert Schiff, "Torn Together," *Artforum International* 24, no. 5 (January 1986): 82, <https://www.artforum.com/print/198601/ching-ho-cheng-s-unrepeatable-abstractions-35125>.
- 11 Ching Ho Cheng, quoted in David Rattray, "Het psychorealisme van Ching Ho Cheng," *Bres* 61 (December 1976): 74.
- 12 Ching Ho Cheng quoted in Kohn, "A Conversation: Ching Ho Cheng."
- 13 Gert Schiff wrote the 1972 *catalogue raisonné* on Johann Heinrich Füssli. His book *Images of Horror and Fantasy* (1979) was a critical and psychological study of nineteenth and twentieth century fine art that dealt with the unease and disquietudes of the modern age. He also focused on the final years of Pablo Picasso, then an understudied and often dismissed area of Picasso's *oeuvre*. After working in the New York University Art History department at Washington Square for a number of years he was recruited to work at the Institute of Fine Arts in 1974 where he was later named Avalon Foundation Professor in the Humanities.
- 14 Schiff, "Torn Together," 82.
- 15 Cheng-Wilson, "Infinity in a Peach Pit," 5.

CATALOG

1. CHENG, Ching Ho 1946 – 1989
American School

STUDY FOR “*ASTRAL THEATRE*,” circa 1972

Graphite on medium-weight blue grey laid paper. 10 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 7 $\frac{3}{8}$ " (27.3 x 17.8 cm). Inked thumb print signature in red on verso in lower right corner.



Ching Ho Cheng was a serious artist, a man who prioritized his work over everything else. He was meticulous, incredibly detail oriented, determined, and introspective. To create under the influence of drugs or otherwise impaired was an anathema to Cheng and his artistic philosophy. However, when asked in an interview what role drugs played in his art making process and artistic development, Cheng responded that while he never created whilst high, preferring to retain clarity and coherence, certain psychedelic experiences did color his perspective by opening his eyes to another “way of seeing”: “I guess the most outstanding example is mescaline. Feeling and seeing a great sense of order in everything. Also getting the most incredibly innocent awareness of things. It was profoundly religious.”¹ It is within these early Psychedelic works that one can see this “innocent awareness of things,” the creativity of thought and design that came from it, and the philosophical musings that the use of mescaline inspired.

This exquisite drawing of an astral baby (*Study for “Astral Theatre”*) was a study for Cheng’s seminal work of the Psychedelic period, *Astral Theatre* from 1972/73 (see figure 1). Equipped with the body of an arthropod and the face of a child, it is easy to place this figure within the realm of this painting. If one looks



Figure 1. Ching Ho Cheng, *Astral Theatre*, 1972/73. Gouache and ink on rag board, 29 ½” x 36” (74.9 x 91.4 cm). Courtesy Ching Ho Cheng Estate, 2022.

closely in the proscenium arch (the black middle ground), a profusion of white outlined figures can be seen (see figure 2 and 3) that almost exactly match that of the preparatory sketch *Study for “Astral Theatre.”* These shapes represent the figure of the astral baby seen in other of Cheng’s Psychedelic works including *X Triptych* (1970 – 1971).

Astral Theatre illustrates Cheng’s interpretation of the ancient Chinese Taoist myth of Chuang Tzu (circa 370 – 286 BCE). Chuang Tzu was a Chinese philosopher whose writings formed the foundational texts of Taoism. The specific myth being depicted in *Astral Theatre* is one of “The Dream of the Butterfly” which reads according to the 1889 translation by H. A. Gilles.:

Once upon a time, I, Chuang Tzu, fluttering hither

and thither, to all intents and purposes a butterfly. I was conscious only of following my fancies as a butterfly, and was unconscious of my individuality as a man. Suddenly, I awaked [sic], and there I lay, myself again. Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly, dreaming I am a man. Between a man and a butterfly there is necessarily a barrier. The transition is called *Metempsychosis*.²²

Cheng's rendering of this dream reads differently than Chuang Tzu's account, yet still alludes to the same idea of metamorphosis, "cosmic birth and individual rebirth,"³ and transformation. In the *Astral Theatre* there are three distinct layers. The outer layer which in this painting is occupied by the formation of a star, the emergence of caterpillar-like creatures from shells in a space teeming with life represents the birth of a universe. The white spherical object around which the green astral babies in their bulbous caterpillar forms (see figure 4) seem to emanate appears to be, according to David Rattray (a poet with whom Cheng collaborated in the late 1980s), the birth of a star. Cheng studied "radiophotographs of stars being born."⁴ In his work he sought to depict light and its potential for infinite possibilities of life: "I want to capture something of the miraculous. Light is the most awesome symbol of the Order of the Universe. Nothing can beat the speed of light. When I paint light I'm not just concerned with

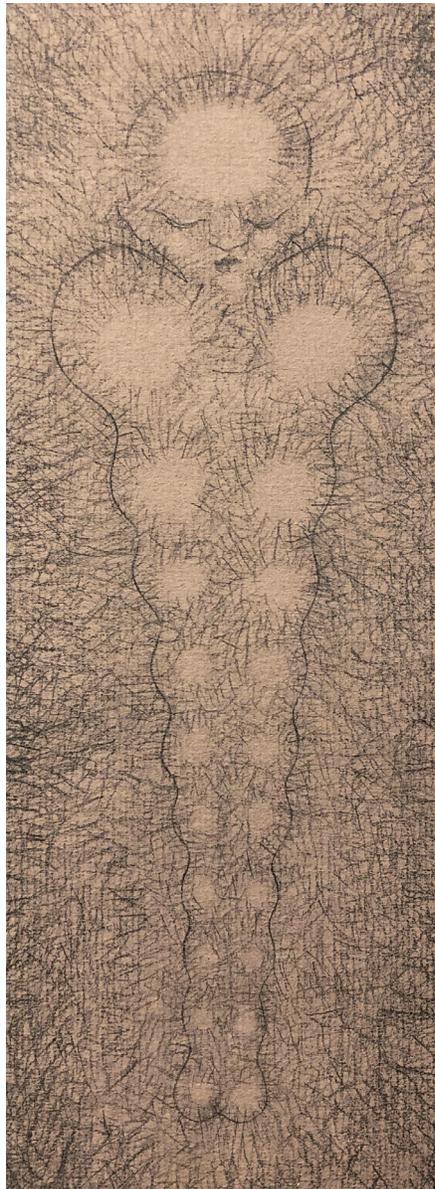


Figure 2. Ching Ho Cheng, detail of *Study for "Astral Theatre,"* circa 1972.



Figure 3. Ching Ho Cheng, detail of *Astral Theatre,* 1972/73.

the phenomenon of light, I am trying to depict the illumination. The light will continue. It is eternal. A light bulb will die but there will always be light. A match will die but there are stars and new stars to be born."⁵ The middle layer, also called the proscenium arch for its similarity to the area of a theatre stage in front of the curtain, in which white lined figures of these humanoid/caterpillar creatures are cocooned in their chrysalises symbolizes the time of both life and death, a state of stasis, of infinity. The inner area embodies the final

moment in the “Dream of the Butterfly,” the moment of rebirth: a tattooed man sharing the space with a fluttering butterfly. Was the butterfly dreaming he was the man, or was the man dreaming he was the butterfly? This is the space of transcending boundaries of reality and dream. The present drawing *Study for “Astral Theatre”* is an anchor throughout the dream and painting. The form of the astral baby appears in each layer of the painting, even in the final layer as body of the butterfly. This figure transcends not only the



Figure 4. Ching Ho Cheng, detail of *Astral Theatre*, 1972/73.

layers of time and space within the painting, but also the stages of the dream of Chuang Tzu. *Astral Theatre* embraces the myth of spiritual rebirth, transformation, and change central to “The Dream of the Butterfly.”

Endnotes

- 1 Ching Ho Cheng quoted in Jaakov Kohn, “A Conversation: Ching Ho Cheng,” *The SoHo Weekly News*, January 27, 1977, 21–23, republished in its entirety on the Ching Ho Cheng Estate website, <https://www.chinghocheng.com/artist-interview>.
- 2 Herbert A. Giles, *Chuang Tzu: Taoist Philosopher and Chinese Mystic*, rev. ed. (1889; London: Allen and Unwin, 1926), 47.
- 3 Gert Schiff, “Torn Together,” *Artforum International* 24, no. 5 (January 1986): 82, <https://www.artforum.com/print/198601/ching-ho-cheng-s-unrepeatable-abstractions-35125>.
- 4 David Rattray, “The Sage and the Butterfly” (unpublished manuscript, 1976), typescript.
- 5 Ching Ho Cheng, quoted in Gregory Millard, “Forward,” in *Ching Ho Cheng: New Paintings 1978-1979* (New York: Gloria Cortella Gallery, 1978), n.p., exh. cat.

2. CHENG, Ching Ho 1946 – 1989
American School

PORTRAIT OF TALLY BROWN, DESIGN FOR A POSTER FOR THE CONTINENTAL BATHS
CHRISTMAS SHOW, 1972

Gouache and ink on board. 20" x 14" (50.8 x 35.6 cm).



All of his [Cheng's] most interesting works have this remarkable simultaneity of the minute with the infinite.¹

- Tally Brown

Ching Ho Cheng and Tally Brown (1934-1989) met in 1970 at a party hosted by their mutual friend, the American poet and photographer, Ira Cohen. They instantly took a liking to one another. According to Cheng, “I never saw anyone quite like Tally.”² For the next five years they were intimately involved. In 1979, German filmmaker Rosa von Praunheim released the documentary *Tally Brown, New York* which featured the stage actress and classically trained singer. Among others of her contemporaries, Cheng was featured in this documentary, where he casually and affectionately reflected on the trajectory of his relationship with Tally Brown by saying: “We used to be lovers...and now we’re good friends... I think she’ll be a friend for life.”³ So they were (see figure 1).

New York born and bred; Tally Brown had a larger-than-life personality. After abandoning classical music for jazz, she became well known as a cabaret performer. As a loose member of the Andy Warhol Superstars, she was featured in several of his films including *Batman Dracula* (1964), *Camp* (1965),



Figure 2. Ching Ho Cheng, “A Celebration with Miss Tally Brown at the Continental Christmas Show,” Saturday, December 23, 1972 at the Continental Baths

and *Four Stars***** (1967).⁴ Throughout the 1960s, Tally Brown was a frequent performer in the New York underground performance scene, the Living Theatre, which was where she met Warhol. In April 1972, she started to perform at the Continental Baths with her first show titled “Sensation of Scarecrow in a Garden of Cucumbers.” Located in the basement of the historic Upper West Side Ansonia hotel in between West 73rd and 74th Streets on Broadway, the Continental Baths was revolutionary, a space of expression and community during its short eight-year existence. Created in 1968 by owner Steve Ostrow when homosexuality was still illegal in



Figure 1. Tally Brown and Ching Ho Cheng, Tally Brown’s apartment, New York, circa 1972. Photographer unknown. Courtesy Ching Ho Cheng Estate, 2022.

New York, the Turkish style bathhouse was a place exclusively for gay men. There were exceptions to this “men only” rule. “Ladies [were] welcome” to the weekly Saturday midnight entertainment that featured some of New York Underground’s most exciting established and upcoming artists. Along with Tally Brown, Bette Midler (who soon developed the moniker “Bathroom Betty” for the frequency of her performances), Barry Manilow, Frankie Knuckles and Larry Levan, the fathers of house music, and others performed at the bathhouse to a crowd of semi-clothed to nude patrons. In December of 1972, Tally Brown was back at the Continental for “A Celebration with Miss Tally Brown at the *Continental Christmas Show*.” It was for this show that the present painting *Portrait of Tally Brown, Design for a Poster for the*

Continental Baths Christmas Show was created. With the creation of a poster in mind (see figure 2), Cheng emphasized the drama and personality of Tally Brown. Cheng’s poster for the show was advertised in the *Village Voice’s* December 21, 1972 edition (see figure 3). In this seasonal performance Tally Brown wore a hairstyle intermingled with white lights which were on for the finale. The illuminated bulbs seen populating her hair in the painting and poster refer to this very special coiffure. She is presented as an astral goddess sitting atop the clouds in the evening sky. Surrounding her is a sea of blue sperm-like shapes that Cheng frequently used in his other psychedelic works. One could argue that this is how he saw his lover. In his own words he compared her to one of the foremost art historical symbols of fertility: “To me, she’s...like a fertility goddess, she’s like a Venus of Willendorf.”⁵

Cheng’s *oeuvre* is not densely populated with portraiture, even of those closest to him. Among the thousands of his works on paper there exist but a handful of this genre. Another of this select group also on display is the painting *Portrait of Sybao, the Artist’s Sister*, also of 1972, has an interesting and until recently, unknown connection to *Portrait of Tally Brown*. The verso of this intimate representation of Sybao Cheng-Wilson (*née* Cheng), his younger sister by nine years, bears evidence of Cheng’s process and of extra attention being paid to execution of Brown’s hands (see figure 4 and 5). *Portrait of Sybao, the Artist’s Sister* is an ethereal rendering of a young Sybao around the age of 15. It is enigmatic whether it is a reflection of the young woman in the still, black water or a face gently emerging from its depths. Around her lay scattered pink cherry blossoms interspersed with the froth and bubbles sitting atop the water (see figure 6). In this portrait a quiet strength of the subject is revealed, a serenity, and calmness



Figure 3. *Village Voice* (December 21, 1972): 70.

marked with eternal youth and beauty (see figure 7).



Figure 4. Ching Ho Cheng, verso of *Portrait of Sybao, the Artist's Sister*, circa 1972.



Figure 5. Ching Ho Cheng, detail of *Portrait of Tally Brown*, 1972.



Figure 6. Ching Ho Cheng, detail of *Portrait of Sybao, the Artist's Sister*, circa 1972.



Figure 7. Ching Ho Cheng, detail of *Portrait of Sybao, the Artist's Sister*, circa 1972.



3. **CHENG, Ching Ho 1946 – 1989**
American School

PORTRAIT OF SYBAO, THE ARTIST'S SISTER, circa 1972

Gouache and ink on heavy-weight woven rag paper. 11" x 14 ¾" (27.9 x 37.5 cm). A blue watercolor study for *Portrait of Tally Brown, Design for a Poster for the Continental Baths Christmas Show* on verso.

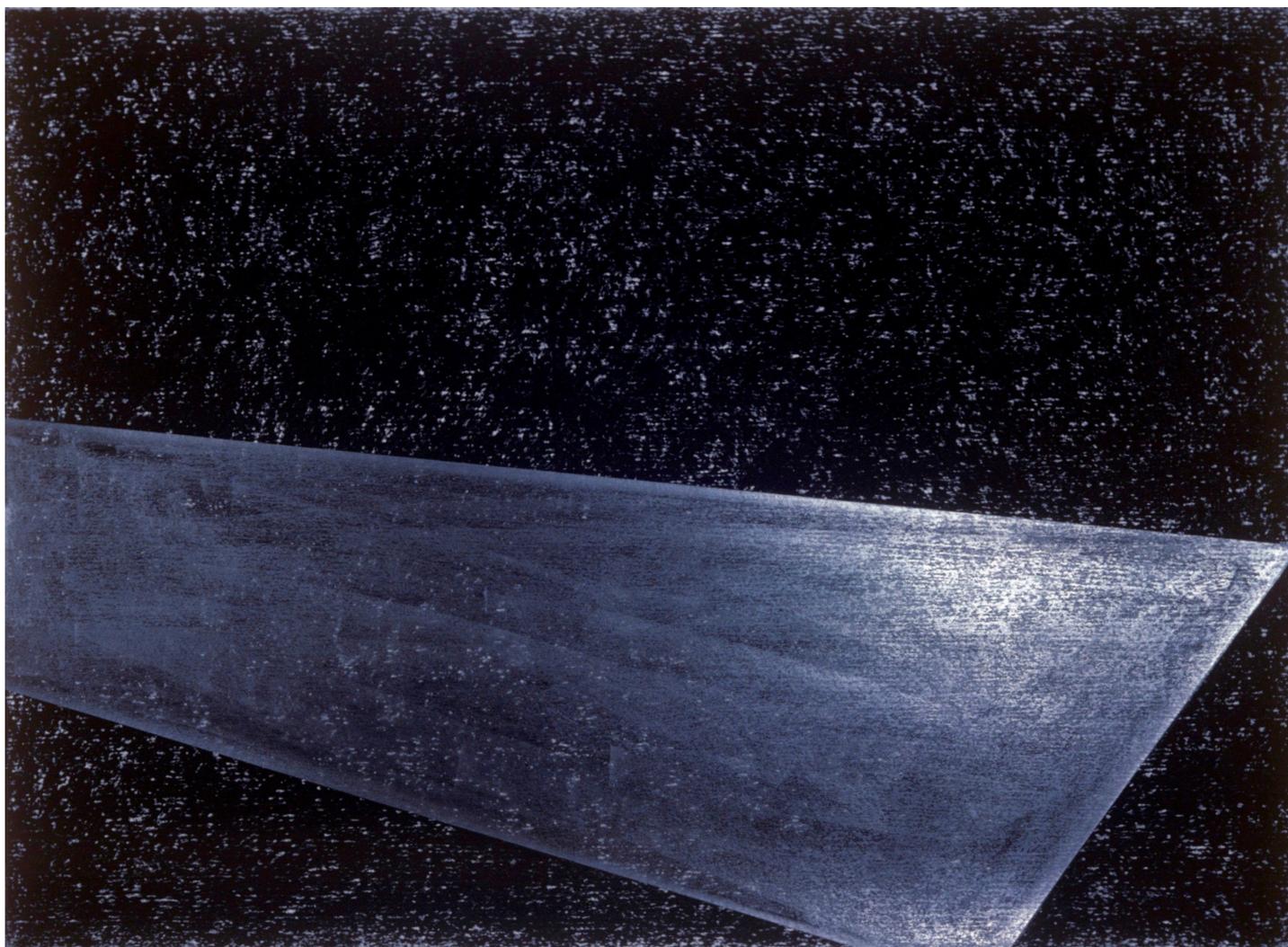
Endnotes

- 1 Tally Brown in Rosa von Praunheim, *Tally Brown, New York* (West Germany: Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR), 1979), 1:05:09.
- 2 Ching Ho Cheng in *Ibid.*, 1:02:10.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 1:03:18.
- 4 Tally Brown was recently featured in The Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in the exhibition *Tally Brown* from March 8, 2021 – February 6, 2022, <https://www.warhol.org/exhibition/tally-brown/>.
- 5 Ching Ho Cheng in von Praunheim, *Tally Brown, New York*, 1:03:30.

4. CHENG, Ching Ho 1946 – 1989
American School

UNTITLED (BLACK PRISM OR UFO SERIES), 1982

Charcoal and pastel on paper. 21 ½” x 30” (54.6 x 76.2 cm). A Ching Ho Cheng Estate label is located at the lower right corner on verso of frame: *CHING HO CHENG / www.chinghocheng.com / Chelsea Hotel 222 W23 Street NYC 10011.*



By the time Cheng graduated from the Cooper Union in 1968, the world was on the brink of a precipice. How we understood ourselves and our place in this universe was expanding daily. In 1969 the United States made the first of many successful attempts to reach the moon. For the first time a human walked on the surface of the moon, and we looked back at the Earth in an entirely new light. The years that followed did not dampen this effect but merely transformed it. We understood space as the new frontier for scientific exploration and within that the hopes of many were firmly placed, including those of Ching Ho Cheng. The romance of space exploration reached every facet of society, including the fine arts.

Evocations of space appeared throughout Cheng's *oeuvre* and didn't stop as the fervor surrounding the first moon landing abated. In the early 1980's—the years preceding the torn works—Cheng developed a small series of works known as the *Prism* or *UFO Series*. Elements of these carried over to subsequent works including the blue and black (see figure 1) or green and black torn works. Large metallic monoliths sliced through charcoal-colored horizons. As seen in the present work Cheng used a particular method to achieve the speckled texture and



Figure 1. Ching Ho Cheng, *Untitled (Blue and Black Torn Work)*, 1985. Charcoal, graphite, and blue pastel on torn rag paper, 14" x 21" (35.6 x 53.3 cm). Courtesy of the Ching Ho Cheng Estate, 2022.



Figure 2. Ching Ho Cheng, Detail of *Untitled (Black Prism or UFO Series)*, 1982.

Figure 3. Ching Ho Cheng, Detail of *Untitled (Blue and Black Torn Work)*, 1985.



appearance in both the areas of charcoal and graphite. To accomplish this Cheng used a technique called *frottage*, deriving from the French word for “rubbing.” In these works, Cheng used a rough surface to place the paper against—in this case the plaster walls of the Chelsea Hotel—and then applied the charcoal and graphite medium. Thus, the surface effect of the paper took on the textured appearance of the rough plaster wall. By doing this, Cheng imbued the charcoal area with a sense of depth and endless expansion, the graphite monoliths, on the other hand, gain a physicality that the areas representing space definitively lack. This effect varies from work to work and in the later blue and black torn works the monoliths appear far denser and more mottled and are positively erupting from the surface (see figure 2 - 3 respectively). The striking graphite monoliths that cut across the dense and endless black have a certain luminosity that reveal Cheng's lifelong interest in light, the eternal, and the infinite. It appears that Cheng intentionally created a surface which would interact with light in a playful

and evocative way. In his own words he wrote: “I am trying to depict the illumination. The light will continue. It is eternal.”¹

Endnotes

1 Ching Ho Cheng, quoted in Gregory Millard, “Forward,” in *Ching Ho Cheng: New Paintings 1978-1979* (New York: Gloria Cortella Gallery, 1978), n.p., exh. cat.

5. **CHENG, Ching Ho 1946 – 1989**
American School

UNTITLED (SHADOW BOX SERIES), 1984

Gouache on rag paper. 22" x 41" (55.9 x 104.1 cm). Dated in pencil on verso in lower left corner: 3.IV.84. Initialed in pencil on verso in lower right corner: CH. A Ching Ho Cheng Estate label is located at the lower right corner on verso of frame: CHING HO CHENG / www.chinghocheng.com / Chelsea Hotel 222 W23 Street NYC 10011.



*I want to capture something of the miraculous. Light is the most awesome symbol of the Order of the Universe. Nothing can beat the speed of light. When I paint light I'm not just concerned with the phenomenon of light, I am trying to depict the illumination. The light will continue. It is eternal.*¹ - Ching Ho Cheng

In his plastic lined studio, Ching Ho Cheng created a series of exquisitely executed gouache paintings with the use of an air brush and a steady hand (see figure 1). It was the early 1970s and Cheng had started to move away from producing his so-called “Psychedelic” works and found inspiration from his physical surroundings: “I have had all my explosions. Now I am concerned with the subtlety of expression.”² The year 1973 marked the end of Cheng’s “Psychedelic Period.” It was at that time when he shifted his focus to hyperreality. As his small studio was just down the hall from his apartment in the Chelsea Hotel, he sought inspiration from his surroundings. He saw the reflection of the universe in items that were frequently overlooked, taken for granted, and dismissed. From a crack in the wall to the peeling paint of his Chelsea Hotel apartment Cheng saw the complexities and infinite possibilities of the universe, eternal life, and a wealth of inspiration. “It has been my intention to lift what one sees out of its particular frame of reference; to provide a new vantage point to what is germane to the experience of seeing. *I do not seek to celebrate or apotheosize the mundane—far from it—I simply take great pleasure*

*in little things....*In the peeling, crumbling, cracked walls of my studio, there is a lunar landscape. I travel through the wood grains of my floorboards. They are lofty mountains and calm lapping waters of a lake. Sometimes they are drifting sands of the desert.”³

According to Henry Geldzahler (1935–1994)⁴, for Cheng “There is instead the need to empty his work of all social or cultural vestiges in order to cleanse perception and return it to its natural state.”⁵ He muted the materiality in what can be seen, and what remained was the essence of being: light, and a new way of seeing.

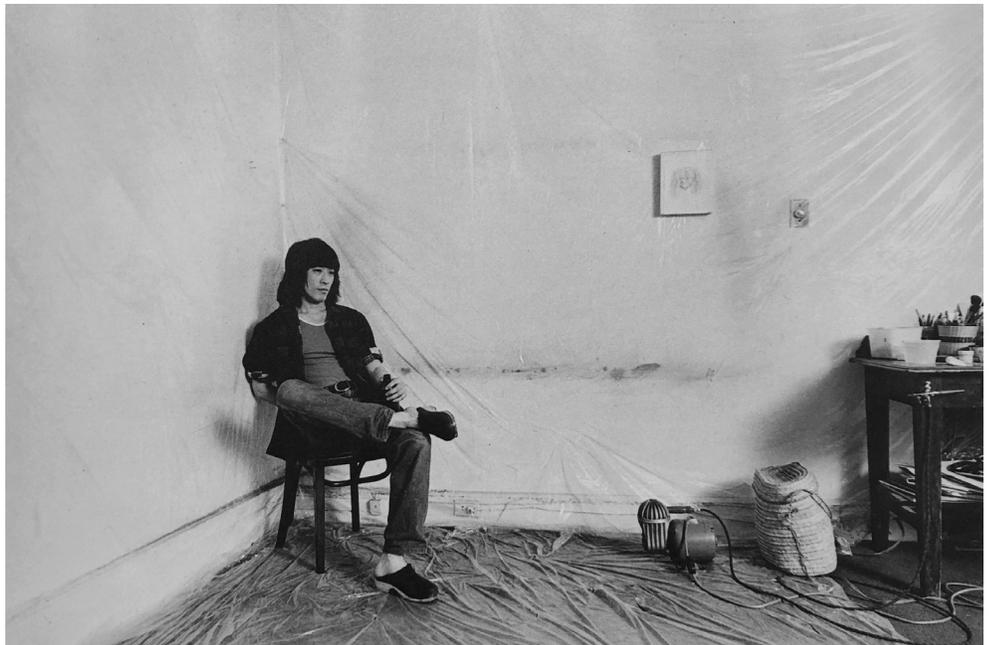


Figure 1. Ching Ho Cheng sitting in his studio in the Chelsea Hotel with the floors and walls protected with plastic, an airbrush seen sitting to his left, 1979. Photo by Barry Schapiro, Courtesy Ching Ho Cheng Estate, 2022

As Cheng so eloquently put it, “It is a way of seeing. It is so hard to describe. It is a very personal view of the universe. I keep seeing it everywhere. I can’t escape it. It’s energy. I see it in a streetlight. I can see it in an oil slick on the road. I can see it in a peach pit. I can see it everywhere. For me painting is a very spiritual thing. It is the most spiritual thing I do.”⁶

Ching Ho Cheng's gouache works featuring quotidian subjects culminated in the so-called "Shadow Boxes" of 1981-84, works that Gert Schiff called a decade's long "gradual purification...by limiting his subject matter, while remaining true to his habit of working exclusively with paper."⁷ Schiff went on to describe the shadow boxes as "evocations of sheer immateriality" where the known and unknown unite:

"Framed in a shallow box or case, they are evocations of sheer immateriality, white on white. Yet they are endowed with peculiar luminosity: the less paint is applied to the paper, the more the paper absorbs the real light in the room. The shadows cast by the walls of the case, even the reflections on the Plexiglass cover, interact with the airbrushed paint, creating a parallel between the illusion within, created by the painter, and the play of real light without. Thus reality and illusion are harmonized and become indistinguishable."⁸

The present painting, created at near the end of his gouache period, is an example of what Schiff was describing. It presents itself complete distillation of everything Cheng had been working towards for the last decade. It wasn't the source of light that he represented in the present painting, but the effect of light. He portrayed light and its corresponding shadows through the frame of a window. By placing these delicate works in shadow boxes, which created shadows of its own, the result was shadows upon shadows, a play on the idea of light itself. Just as reflections of light change as the sun passes through the sky, the shadows from the shadow box will do the same. The white-on-white shadow boxes are among the most subtle of all the gouache works and as such take time to study and consider from all angles to truly appreciate.

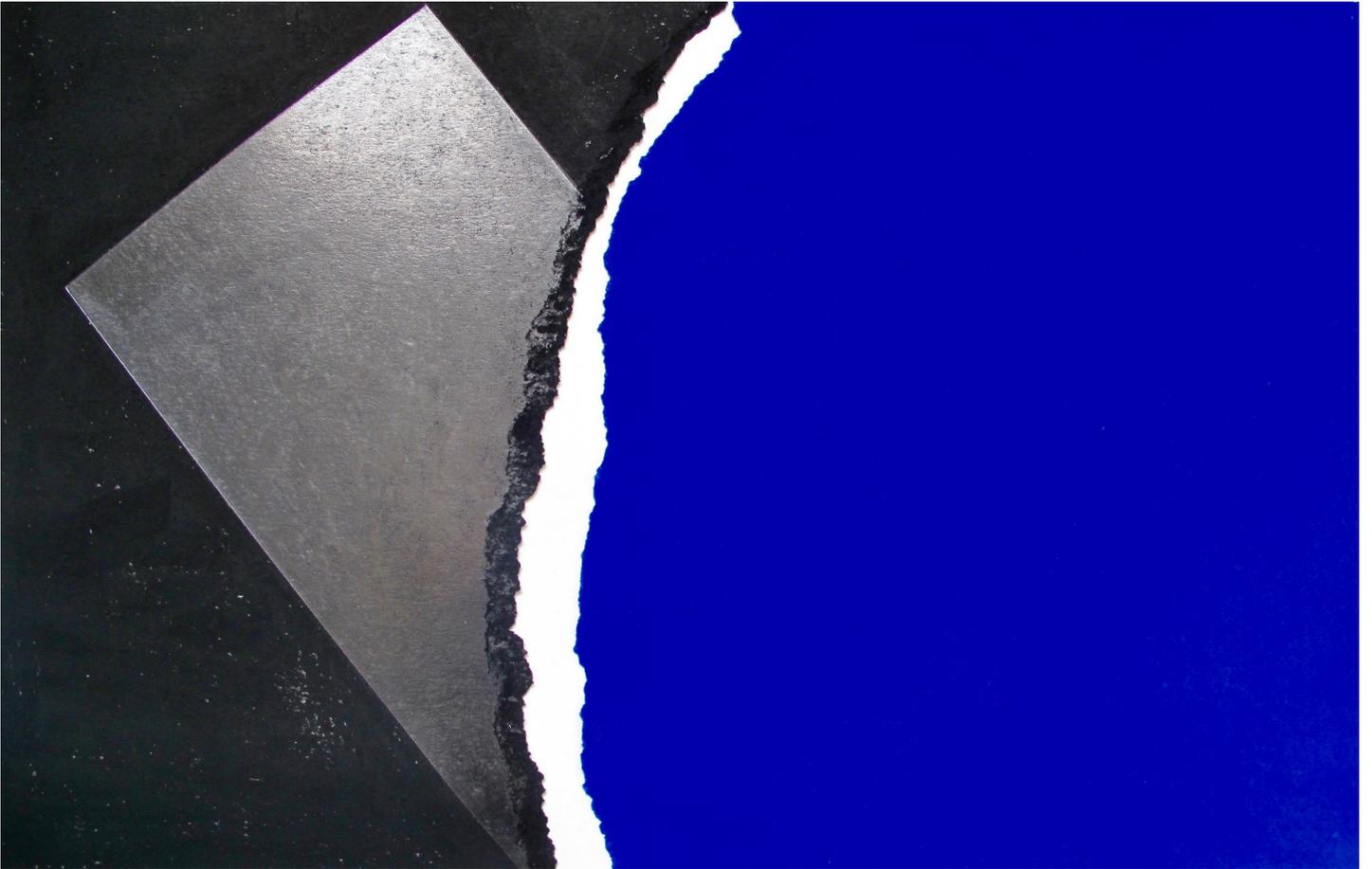
Endnotes

- 1 Ching Ho Cheng, quoted in Gregory Millard, "Forward," in *Ching Ho Cheng: New Paintings 1978-1979* (New York: Gloria Cortella Gallery, 1978), n.p., exh. cat.
- 2 Ching Ho Cheng, quoted in Gert Schiff, "Torn Together," *Artforum International* 24, no. 5 (January 1986): 82, <https://www.artforum.com/print/198601/ching-ho-cheng-s-unrepeatable-abstractions-35125>.
- 3 Ching Ho Cheng, April 7, 1980, quoted in Everson Museum of Art, "Exhibitions - Ching Ho Cheng: Intimate Illuminations," *Everson Museum of Art Bulletin*, June 1980. Emphasis mine.
- 4 Henry Geldzahler was a prominent American curator and art critic throughout the late 20th century. He started his career as curator of American art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In 1966, Geldzahler carried out his duties as the United States commissioner to the Venice Biennale. He also served as the Commissioner of Cultural Affairs for New York City under Mayor Edward I. Koch from 1977 until 1982. Geldzahler was a fierce advocate of contemporary art.
- 5 Henry Geldzahler, "Studio Visit: Ching Ho Cheng," *Contemporanea* 1, no. 4 (November/December 1988): 84.
- 6 Jaakov Kohn, "A Conversation: Ching Ho Cheng," *The SoHo Weekly News*, January 27, 1977, 21-23, republished in its entirety on the Ching Ho Cheng Estate website, <https://www.chinghocheng.com/artist-interview>.
- 7 Schiff, "Torn Together," 82.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 84.

6. CHENG, Ching Ho 1946 – 1989
American School

UNTITLED (BLUE & BLACK TORN WORK), 1985

Charcoal, graphite, and blue pastel on torn rag paper. 14" x 21" (35.6 x 53.3 cm). Inscribed in black ink on verso of frame in lower left corner: *For Gert*. Dated and signed in black ink on verso of frame in lower right corner: '85/CH



In 1982, after working on a drawing for several days, I tore it up in exasperation. Unwittingly, I made the discovery that the spontaneous or accidental gesture has a powerful impact of its own, a kind of dissonance in the order of things. Since that time I have been tearing paper to reconstruct a series of works... Nature is my key inspiration, not to imitate or document it, but to be aware of its inherent duality, the creating and destructive cyclical forces that are at its innermost core. If I could be imbued with the raw and tumultuous energy of nature while tearing, I could also invoke its power of renewal.¹ - Ching Ho Cheng

While Cheng's torn series first developed out of moment of serendipity, many of these works were created with a specific idea in mind. As seen in this study for "Chasm" from 1985 (see figure 1), Cheng visualized a final stage of his design. After this first stage of planning, he introduced the risk of chance to play a crucial part. While he could generally map out where he desired the paper to tear, the paper could not be entirely controlled. The act of tearing the paper risked upsetting and at times dismantling the direction Cheng wanted to take, yet it was this moment of random and unforeseen consequences that excited Cheng the most. The dichotomy between design and nature, planning and chance, and the intentional and unintentional in his work was a microcosm of the larger "primordial drama."

In his own words Cheng described his torn

works as such: "Tearing paper is a gestural act reflecting a moment in time. Inadvertently, there is always the danger of tearing a drawing to shreds, but when I'm willing to risk losing it all, I can chance discovering the resonance of accidental or dissonant form. Tearing excites me when I have pushed it to the edge of the precipice, but it manages to strike a delicate balance there. These works on paper are inspired by the mysterious helix of creating and destruction. I tear

paper, and make these drawings to reaffirm a primordial drama, the ever recurring cycle of birth, life, death. and regeneration. It is my intention that process and metaphor circumnavigate the same sphere."²

Although Cheng could have certainly started anew if the tear did not correspond to his preparatory drawings, it was that moment of chance that fueled his creative process. After tearing the paper Cheng applied the pastel, charcoal, and graphite.³ Finally, he would unite the pieces of hand colored paper allowing the white ground to act both as a part of and background to the amalgamated whole where it "asserts its autonomy and infuses the interstices with light and energy."⁴

At times the white ground represents a small rift in space that doesn't detract from the mass of parts (as seen in the present Black and Blue Torn work *Untitled* from 1985), other works have a deep chasm which disrupts the optical field (as seen in the *Study for Chasm*). According to Schiff, "The fringes

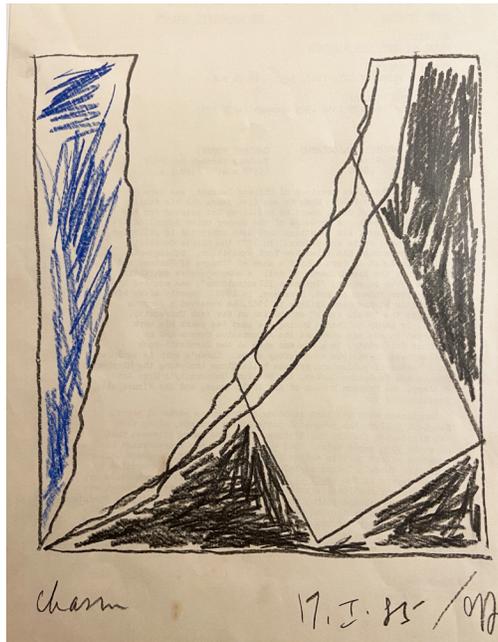


Figure 1. Ching Ho Cheng, *Study for "Chasm"*, 1985. Pastel and Charcoal on the back of a 1985 Shepherd Gallery Press Release announcing the exhibition "Ching Ho Cheng: 20 drawings." Private Collection.

of the individual pieces of paper may be fitted together so tightly that the image appears as a single complex, torn and recomposed, but more often the cleavages are so wide that they disrupt any continuity of the parts.”⁵

Not all the torn works were blue and black, Cheng also created green and black versions. In the green and black torn works, Cheng saw the juxtaposition of regeneration and fertility (in the form of the green mass) with infinite depth, the cosmos, and endless dimensions (represented by black) in which a graphite discoid shape hurdles through time unknown. The blue mass in the blue and black torn series embodies the “color of infinity, of the spirit not of the sky.”⁶ Schiff described the series in the following way: “One piece colored in blue or green pastel is usually juxtaposed with one or several others largely blacked in with charcoal but with sharp-edged or elliptical shapes also rubbed in vigorously in various layers of graphite. Sometimes color is omitted, and the drama unfolds in the interaction between the metallic graphite, the velvety charcoal, and the white ground.”⁷ In the present work, the areas of pastel, charcoal, and graphite are intense in hue and densely applied, so much so that the pastel bleeds through the heavyweight rag paper to which it is administered. The charcoal is also thoroughly applied but in a manner that differs slightly from the areas covered in blue pastel. It is less opaque than the area of blue pastel but still offers the viewer a mass of blackness in which one can find themselves lost in contemplation, lost in the

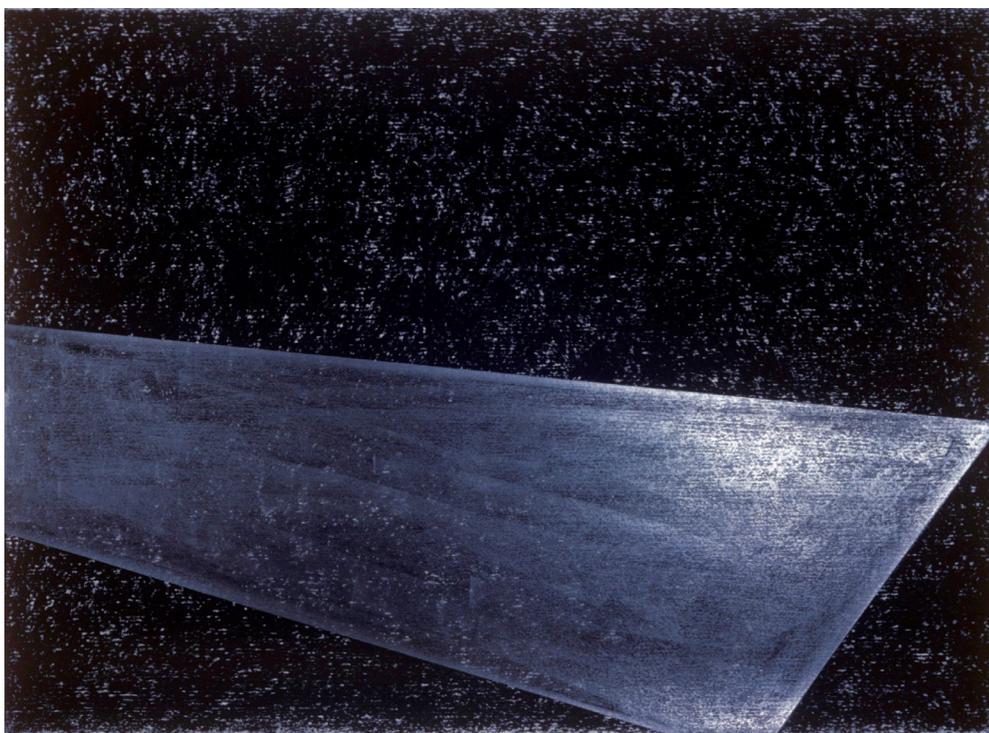


Figure 2. Ching Ho Cheng, *Untitled (Prism or UFO Series)*, 1982. Charcoal and pastel on rag paper. 21.5” x 30” (54.6 x 76.2 cm). Courtesy of the Ching Ho Cheng Estate, 2022.

endlessness of space. On top of the “velvety charcoal” sits a rectangular mass of graphite. With its crisp lines and textured surface, the shape has the appearance of real weight and dimension. To achieve this particular texture seen in both the areas of charcoal and graphite Cheng placed the paper against a rough plaster wall and then applied the charcoal or graphite. This created a frottage, a textured appearance, as seen in both *Untitled Black and Blue Torn Work* and *Untitled Prism Series* from 1982 (see figure 2) “so that cracks or traces of scraper and smoother appear on their surfaces as light-absorbent reliefs.”⁸ In doing so Cheng created a series of multidimensional abstract works with layers of meaning associated with the colors and forms present in each work.

Endnotes

- 1 Ching Ho Cheng, "Part III. Comments on Interrupted Text and Grotto (Rust) works," Ching Ho Cheng Estate, after 1988, n.p. Emphasis mine.
- 2 Ching Ho Cheng, "Comments on Torn Series," Ching Ho Cheng Estate, n.d.
- 3 Gert Schiff, "Torn Together," *Artforum International* 24, no. 5 (January 1986): 84, <https://www.artforum.com/print/198601/ching-ho-cheng-s-unrepeatable-abstractions-35125>.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 85.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 *Ibid.*, 84.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 82.
- 8 *Ibid.*

7. CHENG, Ching Ho 1946 - 1989
American School

UNTITLED (ALCHEMICAL WORK), 1987

Copper and iron oxide on torn gessoed rag paper. 29" x 22" (73.7 x 55.9 cm).



The natural course of growth and decay soon became an integral part of Ching's art, as he began working with oxides that literally grow and change as they interact with the paper, water and air, leaving an earthy rusty residue on the surface to remind us that Ching's art is not merely a representation of natural life, but an extension of it.¹

- Henry Geldzahler

The appearance created from Cheng's alchemical works is like none other of his creations. Like spices strewn across a surface, clumped, and concentrated in patterns that no person has designed, it is a natural process accelerated. It is rust. Both naturally and artificially created, the alchemical works of Ching Ho Cheng provide the viewer with the various elements of rust and the beauty that can be found within. Resembling both the ochres of the deep soil and clay from southern France to the terrain of Egypt and Turkey with its palate and texture of desert rocks, encrusted with ochre and turquoise colored lichen, the alchemical works vibrate with life.

In the fall of 1981 Cheng embarked on a journey to Turkey with his partner Gert Schiff (see figure 1). There, touring "on foot, bus, and boat, exploring both the Turkish Aegean and the mountainous interior" Cheng found inspiration in the land itself.² For the next few years Cheng attempted to recreate what he saw and felt in the fertile grottoes of coastal Turkey but it was not until 1986, that Cheng started to imbue his torn works with greater physicality and presence by creating ferric oxide (rust). He called these his "Alchemical Works." Inspired by the grottoes he saw in Turkey, the ancient ruins in Mexico, and the pigments of the landscapes of Egypt Cheng's work evolved into an entirely new way to channel nature and "the generative and regenerative mysteries of the earth."³

After the initial alchemical experiments of

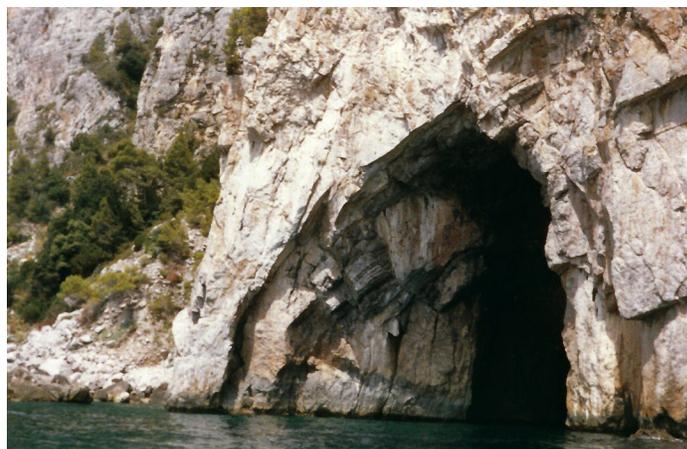


Figure 1. Photograph of the Turkish Coast, Fall 1981. Courtesy Ching Ho Cheng Estate, 2022.

February 1986—specifically a pastel earth-colored work which left Cheng dissatisfied—he took a trip to Mexico with Gert in June of 1986 where he was further inspired the “ancient timeless quality to the land and the ruins” that was altered by the natural process of erosion by wind and water over time.⁴ After months of experimenting, Cheng found that ferric oxide is used “to make a lot of the burnt siennas and earth colors.” He went on to say, “Instead of using these pigments that are already manufactured, I make it myself directly on the paper surface...It's a very natural process.”⁵ The most ambitious of these works was exhibited in 1987 in the front windows of the New York University Grey Art Gallery at Washington Square. Spanning across two windows, *Grotto (Master Alchemical Work)* stretched over 10 feet high and 25 feet long. It was composed of seven irregularly torn panels of gessoed rag paper. According to Gail Stavitsky, “The grotto-like character of these pieces is enhanced by their relief surfaces evoking ossified rock formations and by their usual placement directly upon a white wall which activates the positive and negative forms.”⁶ This use of white space can also be seen in his earlier torn works as both negative and positive space.

As Cheng demonstrated in his exhibition in

1988 at Bruno Facchetti Gallery, process is highly integrated into the essence of the final works. In said exhibition Cheng laid out three large wood-lined pools of a water-vinegar solution into which he immersed several pieces of hardened torn rag paper all covered in gesso, modelling paste, and white acrylic paint with a coating of copper or iron powder. He then changed the solution daily to further oxidation and to accelerate the creation of rust as is seen in the present work *Untitled (Alchemical Work)* from 1987. Before he had access to the large wooden pools at the Bruno Facchetti Gallery, he set up some in his studio



Figure 2. Ching Ho Cheng (lower right) in front of his *Grotto (Master Alchemical Work)*. 10' x 25' (254 x 762 cm), New York University Grey Art Gallery, 1987. Courtesy Ching Ho Cheng Estate, 2022.

at the Chelsea (see figure 2). According to Sybao Cheng-Wilson, Cheng's sister who has managed his estate since 1989, "Stanley Bard, the manager, would be very flexible about renting studios. If he [Cheng] was working on a larger piece, he could rent a larger studio on a month-to-month basis. It was a wonderful arrangement for an artist."⁷

Because of Cheng's early death at the age of 42 his alchemical works represent the final stage of artistic evolution. Just six months before Cheng's death Henry Geldzahler said: "With a contemporary in full career

such as Ching, I suggest that the constant in his work is a feeling of awe in the face of nature and its visual equivalents, and a sense of connectedness with forces that we do not fully understand."⁸ This quote is as pertinent now as when Geldzahler first said it for today's audience is confronted with the same mystery and wonder.



Figure 3. Ching Ho Cheng behind his *Alchemical Baths* at the Chelsea Hotel. Courtesy Ching Ho Cheng Estate, 2022.

Endnotes

- 1 Henry Geldzahler, "Studio Visit: Ching Ho Cheng," *Contemporanea* 1, no. 4 (November/December 1988): 84.
 - 2 Gert Schiff, "Torn Together," *Artforum International* 24, no. 5 (January 1986): 84, <https://www.artforum.com/print/198601/ching-ho-cheng-s-unrepeatable-abstractions-35125>.
 - 3 Ching Ho Cheng, quoted in Gail Stavitsky, "Ching Ho Cheng," *Arts Magazine* 61, no. 5 (January 1987): 113.
 - 4 Ibid.
 - 5 Ibid.
 - 6 Stavitsky "Ching Ho Cheng," 113.
 - 7 Sybao Cheng-Wilson, quoted in Simon Wu, "Interview: Remembering Ching Ho Cheng: Sybao Cheng-Wilson with Simon Wu," in *Devotion: Today's Future Becomes Tomorrow's Archive*, ed. Jarrett Earnest (Toronto: PUBLIC Books, 2022, Forthcoming).
 - 8 Geldzahler, "Studio Visit: Ching Ho Cheng," 83–84.
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Ching Ho Cheng
1946 - 1989