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郑庆和 郑

MAKE NEW YORK YOUR VACATION CITY

Ching Ho Cheng practices writing his Chinese name on hotel stationery.

Ching Ho Cheng / 氧化 oxidation

Russell C. Leong

“I don’t think of myself as a complete person unless I paint.”

— Ching Ho Cheng

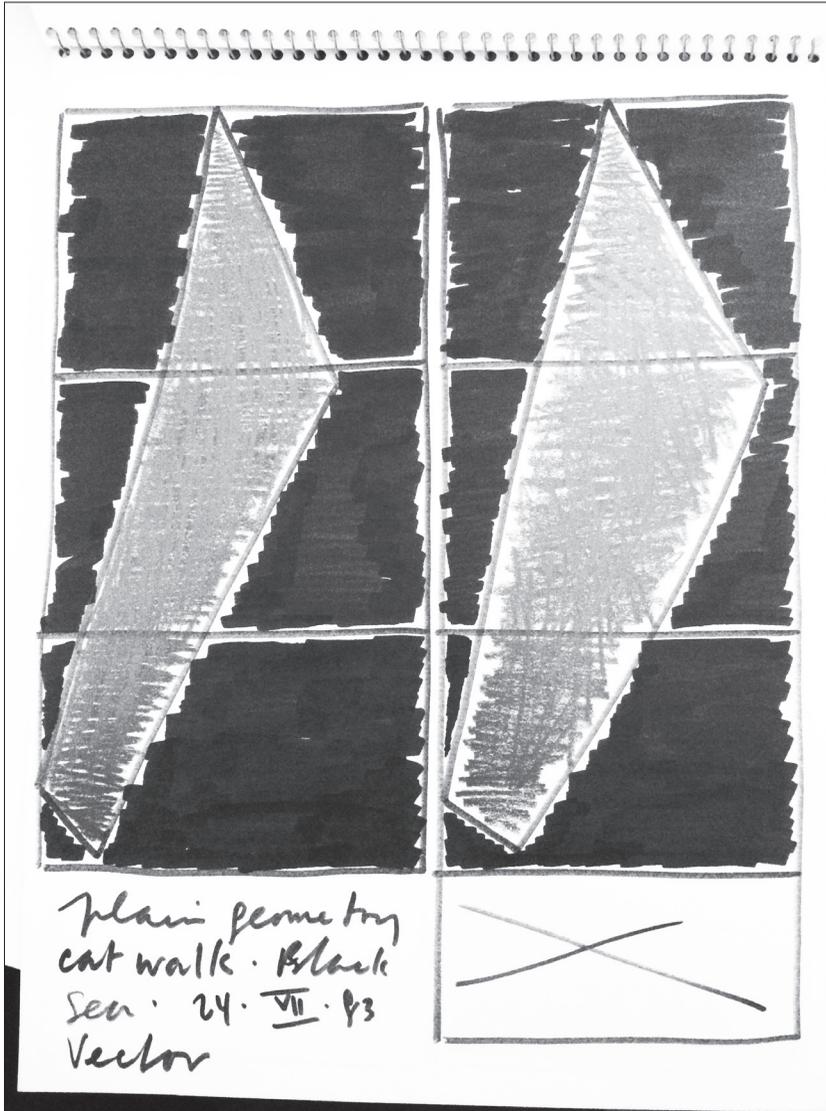
NOT UNLIKE CHING HO CHENG’S 1980s works of torn paper and texts with their deliberately created fragments of color and interrupted writing, my knowledge of the artist was also interrupted by his untimely death in 1989. Thus, these notes are also fragmented, torn from memory, affinity, incomplete knowledge, and corroded even, channeled through the oxidation of time.

Yet, as Salman Rushdie and other writers have stated, sometimes memory, like a mirrored fragment, is another kind of reality by which we can understand a world in flux. In the case of Ching Ho Cheng, these thoughts are a way for me, and for others, to understand the resonance of Cheng’s work as it bridges the end of the twentieth century with the beginning decades of the twenty-first.



Ching Ho Cheng observes his artwork’s oxidation process, proliferating in his man-made pool at the Chelsea Hotel (1987)

In a box of folded letters from the 1980s at my Los Angeles home, there are neatly scripted sentences on yellow legal sheets about New York and about Ching Ho Cheng written by a fellow African American poet, a close friend to both Cheng and myself. So it is ironically through another’s shared words, rather than directly by images, is how I first got to know the art of Ching Ho Cheng, and more so, later on, about the artist himself from his sister, Sybao Cheng-Wilson. Sybao, whom for almost thirty years since Cheng’s death in 1989, has kept his art alive through preserving, promoting, and archiving his images, making sure that each painting, each photo, each letter or sketch, has been saved rather than destroyed. In the latest posthumous exhibition of his work, “Ching Ho Cheng (1946-1989): The Five Elements” at the Shepherd W & K Galleries in Manhattan, Sybao states in the catalogue:



"Plain Geometry, Cat Walk, Black Sea, Vector," drawing from Ching Ho Cheng's sketch book (July 24, 1983)

“My brother, Ching Ho Cheng, discovered Taoism early in his artistic career when he began his quest for spirituality, harmony, and balance. Thus, the Five Elements became an integral part of Ching’s philosophy. The elements of water, fire, wood, metal, and earth and their universal law of transformation came to define Ching’s core artistic principles. The metaphysical inhabits all of my brother’s works from his early psychedelic to his last alchemical paintings.”

In a sense, Sybao has made it part of her life and family mission to help preserve, interpret, and to distill the essence and meaning of her brother’s iconic work for viewers in-the-know, and for those new to his work during the past three decades. All interpreters of Cheng’s work and life therefore are indebted to her passion and love for continuing his art and nurturing his life story in all its myriad, elemental forms. As part of this “interrupted text” we have made an attempt here to visually fill in some elementary gaps by reproducing photos of Cheng’s father, Paifong Robert Cheng, China’s last ambassador to Cuba before 1949; Cheng’s mother Yufan Rosita Cheng; and photographs of Cheng in his Chelsea studio in New York City; as well as selected images from his oxidation series. Cheng, born in Havana in 1946, moved with his family to Queens in 1951 where he attended Forest Hills High School, and later The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art (1964-1968).

Though some Western critics have asserted that there is “nothing of Cuba” or even “Chinese” in Cheng’s work, I believe, on the other hand, that culture, bloodline, gender, and even class background affect the creative process in archetypal, pre-conscious ways, not only in obvious icons of a commercialized Cuba or what we may superficially know of China’s art in the West. Unlike the famed Afro-Cuban Chinese artist Wifredo Lam (1902-1982), Cheng did not return to Cuba to incorporate indigenous images and European modernist techniques, as Lam did. Cheng took another path, and renounced obvious ethnic influences in his studio work.

If we look back at the studio tradition of Confucian-based literati culture that was developed during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), we find that paintings of an artist, or writer’s studio with requisite images of ink stones, brushes and simple furnishings, were commonplace.

Cheng’s environment was also the “artist’s studio,” and his work from the 1970s such as “The Flame,” is a dynamic rendition of an iridescent flame from a matchstick. Whatever surrounded him—a window frame, match, shower head, peeling plaster wall—were the equivalent props of this late twentieth century Chinese artist’s studio located on his tenth floor of the Chelsea Hotel in New York City, rather than in a bamboo and rock garden in Soochow, China. Because Cheng grew up in downtown New York, he was also a part of a generation of Asian Americans who were involved in alternative lifestyles, the Civil Rights Movement, the Women’s Movement, etc. His earlier psychedelic works of the late 1960s such as “Kiss” and “Queenie” perhaps invoke this kind of youthful, unbridled energy.

Nonetheless, as writers including Carter Foster, Leanne Zalewski, Jaakov Kohn, and Gert Schiff have noted through their critiques and interviews, Cheng’s work is also important today because his techniques and content, to an extent, predate some of the work that contemporary critics find praiseworthy in modern Chinese artists.

For contemporary Chinese artists, however, their rigid adherence to a tradition of scholarly refinement does not work well today or reflect the dislocations, the ambiguities, and the global currents of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Wu Hung, in a recent book *A Story of Ruins: Presence and Absence in Chinese Art*, argues for a new Chinese aesthetics of “ruin,” partially derived from and as a consequence of China’s encounter with the West. One example given is that of Beijing’s famous Yuanming Yuan (Old Summer Palace) in Western Beijing which was originally occupied by fancy buildings and pavilions built in the ornate European style. In 1860, French and English troops rampaged the park, demolishing structures, leaving decapitated buildings shorn of their roofs, broken columns, and gaping spaces among piles of marble and stone fragments. Thus, in mainland China today, artists such as Zhang Dali are known for



Ching Ho Cheng celebrates his first birthday in Havana, Cuba with his parents and half-siblings, Pax and Molan Cheng.



Ty Castellarin (roommate), Ivan the Tie-dye King, Ching Ho Cheng, and Michelle Silva at Cheng's SoHo loft in New York (1970)

their aesthetics of “erasure and revision,” consciously bringing to light the absence of figures and images from official photographs and demolished urban landscapes from China’s recent past.

Outside of China, one can sense both in Cheng’s torn paper works of graphite and charcoal, and later oxidized fragments, a kind of deliberate aesthetic ruin, not one based on colonialist destruction, but rather rooted in a prescient awareness of the transitory, Taoist nature of material phenomena. Paper, water, iron, and the corrosion of time—directed by the artist’s vision—resulted in such works as “The Grotto”(1987) or “The Interrupted Text” (1988). Cheng’s exacting technique, fearless experimentation even at great risk to his lungs and body, coupled with painstaking observation of the quotidian—commonplace objects which surround us—offer much for artists, both East and West, to consider.

On a casual stroll through Beijing’s famed 798 Art Zone (Danshanzi Art District) on the outskirts of the city, one may note that airbrushing and even quasi-psychedelic pop art renderings of Mao and other icons are still being done, albeit consciously for decorative consumption. These leave little room for the imagination. They look stale in comparison to Cheng’s Asian American works from the 1970s. At Shanghai’s 50 Moganshan Road (50M) contemporary art district as well, large sterile white galleries with blown-up, oversized photos, etc., offer little grist for the viewer, unlike Cheng’s radical airbrushed works that illuminate everything from a simple Chelsea Hotel window frame, to a match flame, or rusted shower head that compel the viewer to seek an inward, spiritual reality.

According to the artist’s friend and clairvoyant, Frank Andrews, Cheng had the ability both in his work and life to attain great intensity of focus, akin to *samadhi* (meditative consciousness). Perhaps, as Cheng’s sister also recounted to me, Cheng’s spiritual vision would even cause him to tear or burn his own writing or renderings if he was not ultimately satisfied with his own creation. In one instance, he had rendered a full-sized portrait of his own body, but unsatisfied, tore it to pieces leaving only the “sacred heart” in the midst of the chest.

It is this inward, deeper reality that characterizes Cheng’s work, and perhaps it is his final series of works created through oxidation and rust which, illustrate this nationless quest and journey without borders. After a visit to Turkey’s ancient caves and grottoes in the 1980s, Cheng became entranced with the reddish earth that revealed an oxidized tonal palette. When he returned back to his Chelsea studio, he began to experiment with paper and ferric oxide works which led to an installation at the Grey Art Gallery in 1987 of an arch facing Washington Square Park. Henry Geldzahler, in his definitive 1988 essay of Cheng’s studio process in *Contemporanea*, observes:

“After hundred-percent rag paper is torn and gessoed, he covers it with an acrylic medium, gray iron powder, and modeling paste. For two weeks he soaks the work in pools of water. The powder rusts and pigment emerges. By changing the water daily, Cheng keeps the oxidation process going and the work becomes richer in color. ‘Rust is ferric acid,’ he explains, ‘among the most permanent substances in nature. The Egyptians used ferric oxide for pigment and their frescoes are as fresh today as when they were made.’”

Challenging time, as rust does, my notes are but a part of an organic process to be continued by others, to borrow the artist’s own concept. Still, it is Cheng’s sister, Sybao, who actually provides the missing links and extensions to understanding not only Ching Ho Cheng’s work, but also his bold persona as a Chinese American artist who was nomadic in his intellectual, bodily, and astral travels through the universe.

In addition to the family photographs kindly provided by Sybao Cheng-Wilson, we are reproducing several images from Ching Ho Cheng’s oxidation series, with grateful permission from the Shepherd W & K Galleries in New York. Frank Andrews graciously provided a tour of his private collection of Cheng’s works and shared stories about the artist. Cheng’s paintings are included in several public collections: Whitney Museum of American Art, Brooklyn Museum, Cleveland Museum of Art, Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Everson Museum of Art, Detroit Institute of Arts Museum, Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden and others.

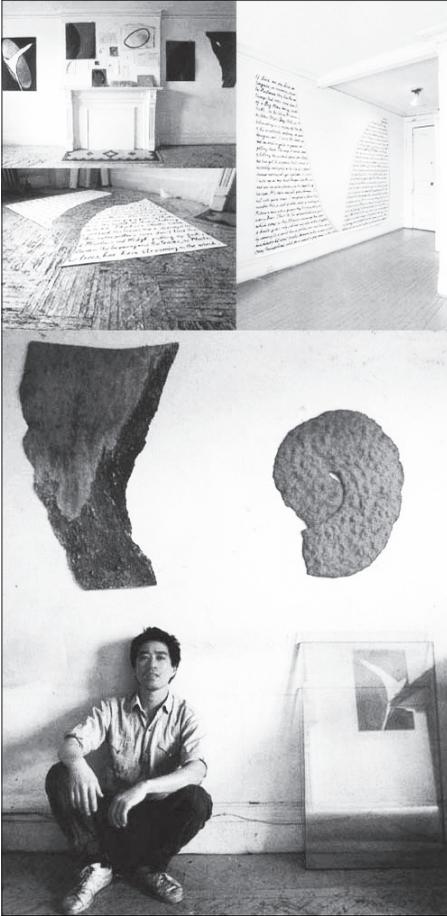
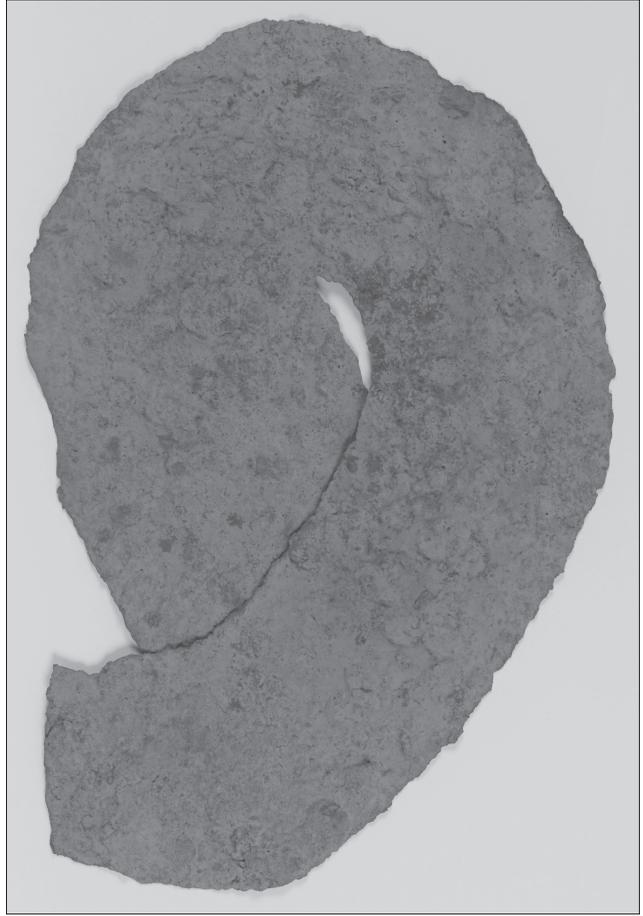
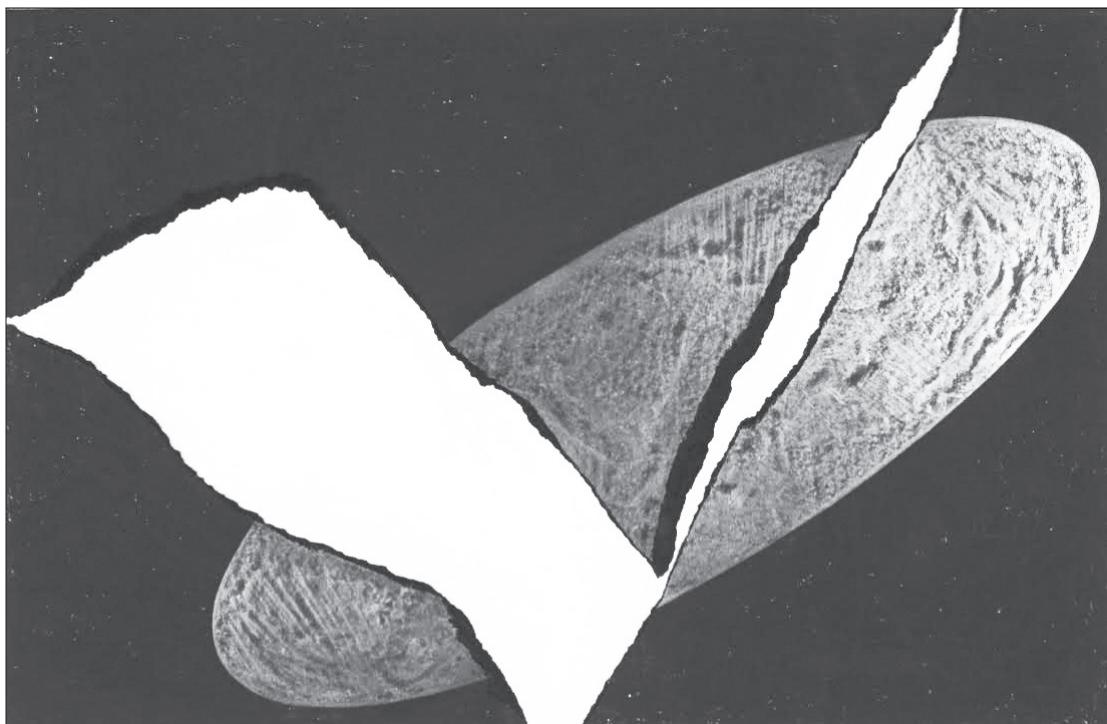


Photo by William Duke



"Untitled," iron oxide on paper 30" X 20" (1988)



"UFO," charcoal and graphite on torn rag paper 20" X 30" (1986)

For Ching and Sybao:
Inspired by the chords of bronze singing bowls they
have struck to channel sacred notes to their side.

— R. L.

氧化 oxidation

brother and sister

how your two lives drifted together

from the south china sea

the caribbean, to the aegean

green black blue borderless

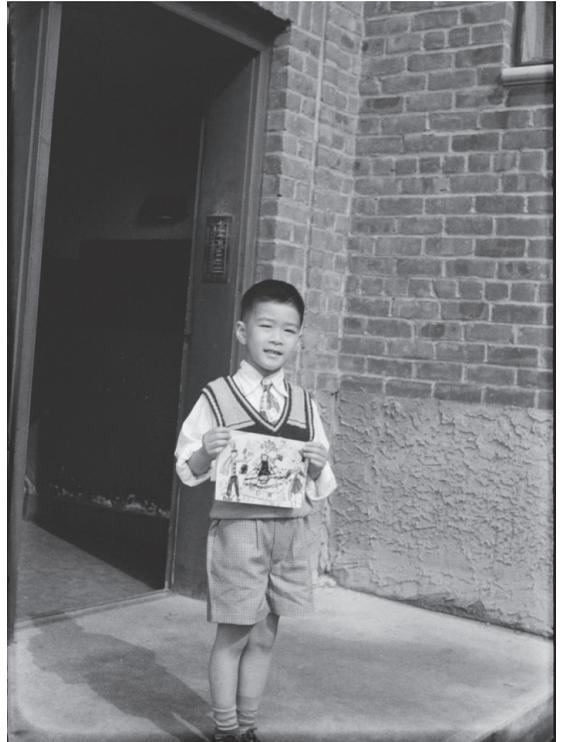
dreaming writing dancing awake

within the bronze bowl of this world

all elements oxidize at the edges

of your boundless sacred heart

May 15, 2016
New York City



Ching Ho Cheng arrives from Havana, Cuba to his new home in Queens, New York. This is his first documented painting in 1951.



Sybao Cheng-Wilson ceremonially strikes a bronze bowl eight times in honor of her brother (May 8, 2016)

Bio

Russell C. Leong is the founding and current editor-in-chief of CUNY FORUM, and served as the editor of *Amerasia Journal* (1977-2010) at UCLA.

