

On Ching Ho Cheng's Ecologies

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Between 1970 and 1973, Ching Ho Cheng (1946–1989) produced a series of paintings he referred to as his “psychedelics.” They depict vibrant, intricately detailed visions of natural, mythological, and biological elements mixing. In *Chemical Garden* (1970), one of the most iconic of the series, a sinister, lizard-like smile sits surrounded by a long intestine, draped on a bed of squirming, microbe-like particles. The image is sharply delineated by two squares. In the inner square, the smile and the intestine reside in a bed of blue tendrils. In the larger square, which runs to the edges of the work, sperm-like red droplets grow into increasingly complex paisley beings over a background of green bacilli.



Chemical Garden, 1970. Gouache and ink on rag board, 30 × 30 inches (76.2 × 76.2 cm)



Chemical Garden Study, 1970. Gouache on rag paper, 13 3/4 × 16 3/8 inches (34.9 × 41.6 cm)

Cheng, who was born in Havana to a Chinese diplomatic family,¹ raised in Queens, and an avid world traveler, was deeply influenced by ancient spirituality. *Chemical Garden*

¹ Cheng was born in Havana, Cuba, where his father held a diplomatic post as part of the Kuomintang (The Chinese Nationalist Party). Cheng's family moved to New York in 1951. He lived in Kew Gardens Hills, Queens, and studied at the Cooper Union School of Art (1964–1968).

may have been directly inspired by Tibetan mandalas and Taoist religion, but also probably his use of psychedelic drugs. It is an image emblematic of his lifelong interest in the cyclical nature of life and death; *Chemical Garden* appears to capture that sense of interconnectedness, depicting a writhing, hyperactive space of cells reproducing, dying, and regenerating.

Cheng's work has often, not incorrectly, been contextualized in terms of this interest in ancient philosophies. He considered his art an extension of this practice ("For me painting is a very spiritual thing. It is the most spiritual thing I do."²) But here, I want to see if we can *also* consider his work for the ways that it engages another aspect of his identity—his nascent queerness. I think that his work reflects, challenges, and expands on very contemporary discourses around queerness, especially those that are connected to an ecological outlook. In particular, I think Cheng's work both *illustrates* this "queer ecological" framework, but also *enacts* it in his life and practice.

Queer ecology is a loose, mostly speculative constellation of practices that seeks to reimagine notions of sexuality, politics, and humanity using models from the natural world. What is gay or lesbian to an amoeba? What is sex to a cell that reproduces itself every two minutes? What can the animal and bacterial world teach us about human sociality? Queer ecology seeks to disrupt heterosexist notions of nature. Artist Lee Pivnik, founder of [The Institute of Queer Ecology](#), defines it as "a visioning tool" and a "functional cosmology" to imagine a world based on the fluidity that queerness promises—where you have the ability to constantly make yourself resistant to categorization.³ Zooming out from the human makes sexuality labels seem arbitrary. It's a welcome refresher to the gridlock of contemporary identity language. What is gay or straight when you're a tree?

Interpretations of Cheng's work rarely mention his sexuality. That's partly because it didn't seem to interest *him* very much; he was much more interested in the cosmic than

² Ching Ho Cheng, quoted in Jaakov Kohn, "Ching Ho Cheng: A Conversation," *The SoHo Weekly News* (January 27, 1977).

³ Lee Pivnik, quoted in Landon Peoples, "At Last, an Entire Institute for Queer Ecology," *Atmos* (January 5, 2021), accessed online.

the earthly. But his sexuality was an aspect of his life. He had many partners, both male and female, including the art historian Gert Schiff, the artist Vali Meyers, the performer Tally Brown, and the poet Gregory Millard. He sadly passed away from AIDS-related causes in 1989. We'd be remiss to label him as a "gay" or "queer" artist because those were not terms germane to his time, but also because his work sought to transcend such labels. Things were more fluid back then. However, if he were to even be *piqued* by any kind of present-day theory, I suspect he might not have been so unhappy with queer ecology. It feels, perhaps, like the heir apparent to the incense-fueled, hippie philosophies of the 1960s and 1970s. It might also explain what feels like the otherwise radical shifts in subject matter and style he made periodically during his all too brief career.

A lot of the affinities between queer ecology and Cheng's philosophy are already self-evident from looking at the work. His psychedelic works in particular image a kind of *multiplicity*, a sense of multiple being very amenable to queer ecological theory. He might have put these ideas in spiritual or Taoist terms, and we might give them a costume change via critical theory, but it's the same: we are not individuals; we are embedded in a web of ecological connections, and there we will find harmony.

With this in mind let's return to *Chemical Garden*. If this is an image of multiplicity, it is not one that is particularly harmonious. It's actually cacophonous and chaotic. Everything is depicted in lurid, dark colors. We previously mentioned the two receding squares that create a frame of sorts. The intestine wraps around the image like a Möbius strip and ends in the rectum: the only element that supersedes the two-layer frame. It's not a penis, even though on initial glance it looks like one. It is from this rectum that the red droplets, or some kind of life force, seem to erupt. The droplets look like sperm, although biologically they should be excrement. Unless, of course, they are sperm being released from the aftermath of anal sex. Perhaps here the rectum is not a grave, but a nursery. The droplets spew forth from the rectum and become more complex as they travel upward in the painting, growing additional organelles of various shapes and colors. The coloring is so beautiful that it's easy to forget we're

actually looking at something (or someone) releasing sperm. The center smile begins to look sinister, like a voyeur.

The process depicted in *Chemical Garden* is not necessarily the human cycle of life. Because the droplets are so abstract, it seems like something more microscopic, maybe manure fertilizing sproutlings, bacteria fixing nitrates in the soil, or waste being turned back into life. It seems to skip a few steps (from excrement to life), but in that way it's most similar to the function of fungi—mushrooms, yeasts, and molds that break down dead matter and turn them into usable nutrients for plants. It makes *Chemical Garden* an image of survival. Staying alive in late capitalism, as Anna L. Tsing writes in *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, requires a similar “fungal” approach to living. It requires “livable collaborations” for every species.⁴

We can see this sort of “fungal” philosophy in a few of Cheng’s other works from this era as well. In *X Triptych* (1970–1971), this cycle is schematized in geometric shapes. The background of each of his works resembles molecules shifting and recombining as well as stars or galaxies. In a work from later in that period, *Motherlode* (1978), we see a sperm floating within actual space, and the very big and the very small are collapsed.



Motherlode, 1978. Gouache on rag board
27 3/4 × 38 inches (70.5 × 96.5 cm)

This is an image of the world well received by queer ecology. The connection between the social worlds of the microbial and the human is the cosmic. Queer ecology

⁴ Anna L. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 54.

emphasizes the interconnectedness of all organisms, along with their natural/cultural histories. Every cell is like a universe. “God” is in our heads. It just depends on what scale we’re talking about. Queer ecology also stresses the fact that humans are themselves networks of living and nonliving agencies, and not singular sovereign individuals. The Human Microbiome Project suggests that only 1 to 10 percent of us is “human,” depending on whether our essential identity is pinned to genes or human cells, respectively. The rest of us comprises bacteria, fungi, archaea, and a few animals invisible to the naked eye. In other words, looking up is not so different from looking down; the galaxies above us are mirrored in the galaxies within us.

After his psychedelics, Cheng turned his interest in the cosmic to the mundane—to the ecology of his studio. His works reduced dramatically into quiet tableaux: scenes of plants, lights, and windows from his apartment in the Chelsea Hotel, where he lived and worked from 1976 to 1989. Sometimes, these images were of friends’ and lovers’ rooms, as in *Waterfall, Chelsea Hotel, New York* (1978), which was of his then boyfriend Gregory Millard’s shower. Or the peeling, cracked walls of *Untitled* (1980), which depicts an iron and an ironing board, paused, in his own studio, as if to admire the glimmer of a rainbow on the chipping walls. Or *Suite 1016* (1979), which is the name of his actual apartment, and the place where his sister, Sybao Cheng-Wilson, now resides with her family.

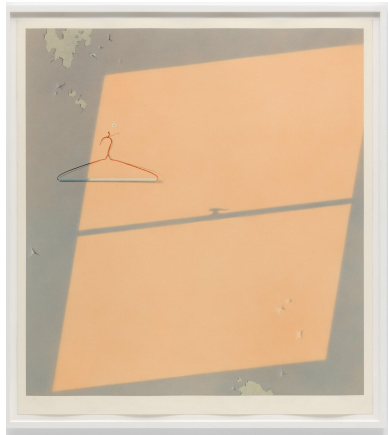


Waterfall, Chelsea Hotel, New York, 1978.
Gouache and ink on rag board, 33 × 29 inches
(83.8 × 73.7 cm)

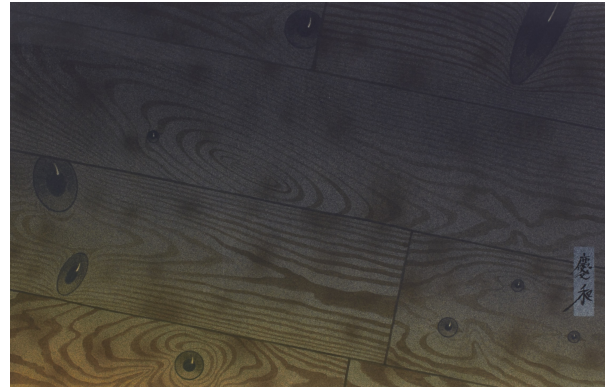


Untitled, 1980. Gouache on rag board, 28 1/2 × 40 inches (72.4 × 101.6 cm)

Cheng painted sunlight as it passed through the window and floorboards of his apartment. One of the first times I went to visit Sybao Cheng-Wilson, we paused at sunset to admire the light as it passed through the window just as it had in his painting *Untitled* (1980). And the floorboard paintings are a pun on being very “bored” in the Chelsea Hotel. Sybao mentioned that he was also broke at the time and couldn’t leave New York, so he just started painting things that he didn’t notice otherwise.



Untitled, 1980, from *Window Series*. Framed: 48 × 43 1/4 inches (121.9 × 109.9 cm)



Untitled, 1976. Gouache on paper, 11 × 17 inches (27.9 × 43.2 cm)

If the psychedelics image our connection to life at the microbial level, maybe these gouaches image his connection at the level of the human: a petri dish of the social ecology of the Chelsea Hotel. Cheng says it best: “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 the drifting sands of the desert.”⁵

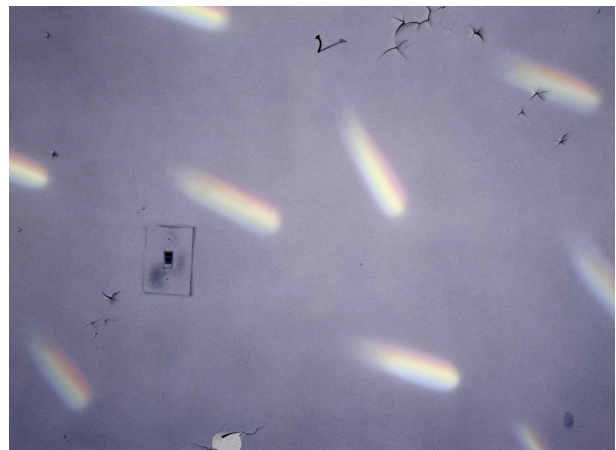
More than an elaborate metaphor, a queer ecological framework in understanding Cheng’s work prioritizes his social life as an integrated aspect of his artistic production. Indeed, the parties and trysts and hangouts in and around the Chelsea Hotel were the fabric of Cheng’s life and work. In the 1960s and 1970s, the roster of residents there included the artists Larry Rivers, David Hockney, Vali Myers, and Richard Bernstein, the

⁵ Ching Ho Cheng, “Note from the Artist,” *Everson Museum of Art Bulletin* (June 1980), published on the occasion of *Ching Ho Cheng: Intimate Illuminations*, Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York, 1980.

fashion designer Charles James, and the rock star Dee Dee Ramone. Cheng once lived in a room that had been occupied by Arthur Miller and Marilyn Monroe. Cheng was also a regular at Max's Kansas City, and was friendly with Andy Warhol and Bette Midler. And the ghosts of these social webs stick around: today, Sybao runs the estate of Cheng out of his original apartment, Suite 1016. I learned that his paintings were often gifts. For example, *Chemical Garden* was a twenty-first-birthday gift to Sybao and hung in her apartment at 780 Madison for many years before his death. Over the course of reading his letters, photographs, and sketches, I came to gather an image of Cheng and his friends and his work as a bustling "queer ecology" in itself. I imagine the Chelsea Hotel as a writhing, multipronged organism, with his paintings like the connective tissue across time and space.



Ching photo with *Tattooed Man*, 1978-79, in his Chelsea Hotel apartment



Suite 1016, 1979. Gouache on rag paper, 27 × 37 inches (68.6 × 94 cm)

While we might romanticize the era of the Chelsea Hotel as one of freewheeling bohemianism and creativity, it was not without its systemic imbalances. In New York in the 1970s, Asian American artists were few and far between, and those who were there might not have labeled themselves as such. While Chinatown would become a hotbed of groups like Godzilla Collective, Basement Workshop, and the Asian American Arts Centre in the 1990s, these were all well after Cheng's time. The Chinese Exclusion Act was part of the reason for this sparsity of Asian American artists; the quota of

immigrants that did arrive in the US was very poor and struggling, and they were unlikely to become artists. And Chinese immigrants were simply not selected to participate in the art scene (as curators, directors, writers, registrars, etc.). As Cheng writes in one of his letters to his college roommate from 1972, "I've been tearing around town trying to find some gallery to give me a show. So far I've exhausted about 70% of the possibilities with no break in sight. Most of them treat me like some kind of rude joke. It's all very discouraging but I don't despair, keeping my heart gay and my head lite." We can applaud Cheng's success as a rare Asian American artist in this environment, but we should also name the hostility toward diaspora artists in the mainstream art world that made his success so singular.

In the 1980s, he started making *literal* ecologies out of his paintings, creating ponds and rock formations in his gallery work. Cheng went to Turkey in 1981. Visiting caves and grottoes, he was fascinated by their colors and textures as well as the aura of ancient stele and monuments. Back in Chelsea, he explored an oxidation process, which led him to submerge paper, covered with copper or iron filings, in water for several weeks. "It was as if lightning had struck," he says. "This act affirmed the creative and destructive aspects of nature."⁶ After tearing and gessoing 100 percent rag paper, he would cover it with an acrylic medium, gray iron powder, and modeling paste. For two weeks he soaked the work in pools of water and the powder would rust into lush browns and reds. Cheng would change the water daily, to keep the oxidation process going so the work would become richer in color. "Rust is ferric oxide," he said, "among the most permanent substances in nature. The Egyptians used ferric oxide for pigment and their frescoes are as fresh today as they were when they were made."⁷

⁶ Ching Ho Cheng, quoted in Henry Geldzahler, "Studio Visit: Ching Ho Cheng," *Contemporanea* (November/December 1988).

⁷ Cheng, quoted in Geldzahler, "Studio Visit: Ching Ho Cheng."



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

This all led to one of his first solo shows, at the Bruno Facchetti Gallery in 1986, where he turned the gallery into a pond of sorts. Here, he visualized the gallery space as a temple, and placed large basins of wood on the floor containing water in which he floated torn papers covered with iron dust. There was nothing on the walls. Only the basins, their slowly reddening papers, and some newspapers were spread on the floor. Viewers would have stared down into the live rusting processes of his work.



Ching Ho Cheng's alchemical process of iron oxide on paper, 1988. Courtesy the estate of the artist

About the same time as this exhibition, in 1987, Cheng installed a work called *The Grotto* in the two large windows of NYU's Grey Art Gallery that face Washington Square Park. *The Grotto* consisted of seven panels across which stretched an irregular arch made out of paper reddening naturally (the arch swept across both windows). This work and the work in the gallery are both part of a series based on the Pelasgian creation myth, which maintains that in the beginning there was only a mother goddess from whose womb everything tumbled: sun, moon, planets, stars, and the earth, with its mountains, rivers, trees, herbs, and living creatures. Here Cheng moved from imaging an interconnectedness to trying to bring its processes directly into the gallery.

Maybe Cheng's work aligns with both Taoist and queer ecological theory because they are complementary theories to begin with, siblings separated by generations. In illustrating and later enacting these theories, he provides a model for a way of art making that predates the ecological consciousness that impending climate disaster has impressed on many artists today. And we should not forget that Cheng operated in conditions not dissimilar to our own. From 1968 to 1989, Cheng was living within the greatest civil rights campaign before our current moment, as well as the Vietnam War, and the death of many of his friends in the continuing HIV/AIDS epidemic. Cheng's response to this turmoil was to look to the solace of the cosmic, to the interconnectedness of the natural world. This turn to the cosmic was not to nullify action, but to contextualize the buzz of human activity in ecological time. It seems only recently has the world caught up with Cheng.

This essay is produced on the occasion of the exhibition More Life: Ching Ho Cheng, curated by Simon Wu, at David Zwirner, 537 West 20th Street, New York, September 17–October 23, 2021.