

More Life: Ching Ho Cheng

Opening September 17, 2021
537 West 20th Street, New York



Ching Ho Cheng, *Untitled*, 1980. © 2021 ESTATE OF CHING HO CHENG / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

David Zwirner is pleased to present *Ching Ho Cheng*, curated by Simon Wu, at the gallery's 537 West 20th Street location in New York.

Throughout his career, Cheng produced a rich and varied body of work that ranged from colorfully psychedelic canvases to subdued abstract explorations of light, tone, and texture in gouaches, torn paper, and experiments in iron oxide. Deeply spiritual and absorbed in ancient cultural traditions, Cheng described his paintings as "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."¹ Art making, for Cheng, was rooted in process, alchemy, and transcendence, and his works invite contemplative close looking.

Curator Simon Wu notes:

One of the few Asian American artists to gain recognition in New York in the 1970s, Ching Ho Cheng was heavily influenced by his study of Taoism and ancient philosophies as well as by the city's vibrant nightlife, in particular his hangouts at Max's Kansas City. He was born in Havana, Cuba, and raised in Queens. His work, however, evades any particular regional or identity marker, concerned instead with the pursuit of enduring truths amidst a time of turmoil.

Between 1970 and 1973, Cheng produced a series of vibrant, intricately detailed "psychedelic" paintings that meld natural and biological elements. They are characteristic of his lifelong interest in the cyclical nature of life and death. After producing the series's "masterwork," *Astral Theatre* (1973), his later works developed into meditative tableaus: reflective scenes from his life

¹ Ching Ho Cheng, quoted in Jaakov Kohn, "Ching Ho Cheng: A Conversation," *The SoHo Weekly News* (January 27, 1977).

in the Chelsea Hotel. In the following years, those tableaux sublimated almost entirely into their component parts—light and shadow—and Cheng would experiment with physical and alchemical gestures, tearing and applying iron oxide powder in his grotto canvases.

To me, Cheng's works, while not explicitly queer, suggest something radical about the interconnectedness of our bodies. How multiple we really are, if we begin to learn, as Cheng did, of our capacity for spiritual rebirth, but also how interdependent, if we ponder the multitudes of bacteria, fungi, and elements living, dying, and reproducing within us. It's a body party, one that feels particularly evident in the frenetic detail of the psychedelic works, but is perhaps just as vital to the quieter pieces, which insist that galaxies can be found in the smallest details of life, so long as we pay enough attention.

Ching Ho Cheng is a part of *More Life*, a focused series of curated solo exhibitions presented on the fortieth anniversary of the ongoing HIV/AIDS crisis. For more information, please visit davidzwirner.com.

Born to Chinese parents in Havana, Cuba, Ching Ho Cheng (1946–1989) moved with his family to New York City in 1951. He studied painting at Cooper Union with Nicholas Krushenick, Richard Anuskiewicz, and Michael Goldberg, while immersing himself in the teachings of Taoism and exploring an eclectic visual catalogue that spanned Tibetan art, Hopi and Navajo artifacts, and Hieronymus Bosch. In the early 1970s, Cheng spent several years living and working in Paris and Amsterdam, where he staged his first one-man exhibition in 1976. Upon his return to New York that same year, he settled into the legendary Chelsea Hotel, forging connections with the building's eclectic and creative residents. Cheng's groundbreaking *Intimate Illuminations* exhibition at the Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York, in 1980 marked one of the first major solo museum shows of a contemporary Chinese American painter. In his final years, Cheng enjoyed growing critical and commercial success. In 1985, he received the Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant and had solo exhibitions in New York annually from 1982 through 1988, receiving praise from such distinguished art historians and curators as Gert Schiff and Henry Geldzahler.

Simon Wu is a writer and curator involved in collaborative art production and research. He is a curator at The Racial Imaginary Institute and an alum of the Whitney Independent Study Program. His essays and reviews can be found in *Frieze*, *Art in America*, and *The Drift*.

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