

What Light Reveals in the Work of Ching Ho Cheng

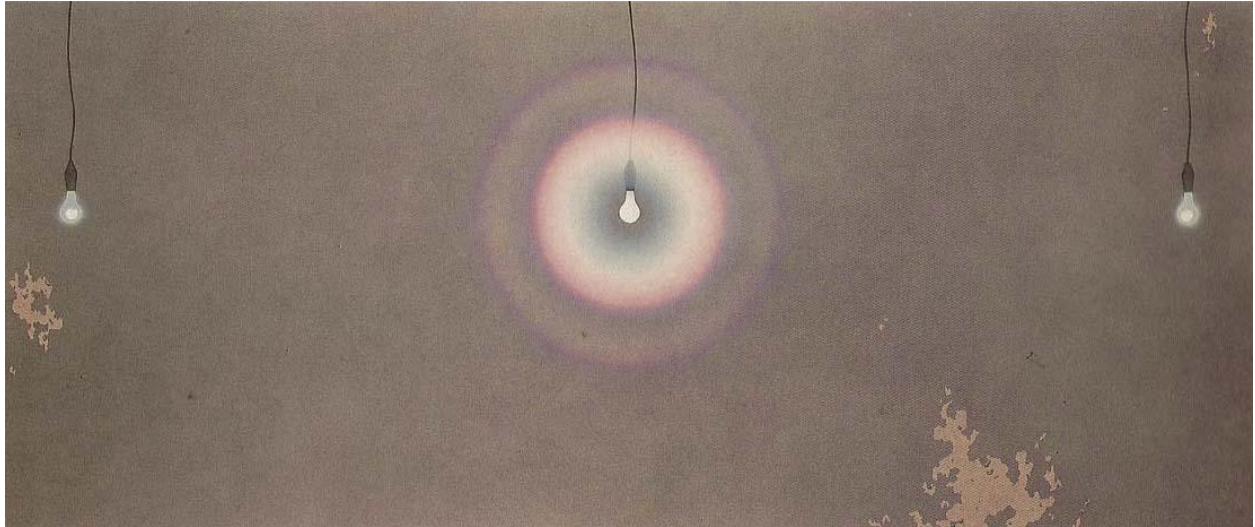
A spider queen lies asleep on her web, strung across the midnight sky. Ascending the steps to the gallery, we are met by “Miss Destiny (Spider Painting)” (1976), a dreamlike scene rendered with an unvariegated lapis blue, starry white specks, and a web of silver pencil. The painting’s most ornate feature is Miss Destiny herself, a mythological combination of spider legs and anthropomorphized torso, human breasts and head under a tiered, blackberry-like crown.



Ching Ho Cheng, “Miss Destiny (Spider Painting)”, 1976, gouache and ink on rag board, (detail)

Though *Ching Ho Cheng* includes a pair of the artist’s early “psychedelic” works—explosive compositions that unravel cosmologies through labor-intensive applications of pattern and brushwork—the exhibition’s emphasis is on Cheng’s subsequent series of meditative still lifes, executed from the late 70s into the mid 80s, that explores the falling of light on the walls of his rooms in the famed Chelsea Hotel. “Miss Destiny (Spider Painting)” ushers us in as an instructive guide for these later paintings. In her slumber, Miss Destiny seems to be missing the astral beauty that sparkles about her. Yet her smooth body reflects back the glints of starlight, in the joints of her legs, in the peaks of her contented face, even atop her closed eyelids. In turn, she

bears her own aura, an unearthly lavender glow. Cheng's work enables an experience of light that goes beyond the eyes to further engage our whole bodies, our entire beings, in the act of seeing. Though he describes light's ephemerality with seductive and dramatic richness, Cheng's images finally make their deepest impact by allowing us to see sight itself as a mystic encounter between a fleeting human consciousness and the fundamental continuities of time and space.



Ching Ho Cheng, "The Studio Lights", 1978, gouache on rag paper

In the gallery's north room, four paintings make up a dynamic ensemble united by recurrent motifs and techniques: plaster walls in need of repair provide backdrops for spare domestic tableaux. The walls are articulated as fields of airbrushed gouache, hypnotic undulations between light and shade, texturally grainy as though photographic. In contrast, the paintings' objects—a wire hanger, a rusty iron, even the tiny cracks in the plaster—are subtly stylized and full of imaginative character.

In "The Studio Lights" (1978), a trio of bare bulbs holds the wide composition in perfect symmetry. The center bulb is adorned by an arresting double halo, so powerful it is reflected off the other bulbs. Cheng's paintings hinge on a tension between the strength of their initial impressions and the unraveling of their underlying implications. The halo, for example, stops the viewer through its uncanny rendering and calls to mind several associations, the refraction of a prism or depictions of the crosses on Mount Calvary. But when considering what it would take to produce this sensory experience for yourself, you realize that the picture imposes a strenuous choreography on the body, a precise positioning in relation to the bulb, stock still and neck stiff, perhaps with one eye closed so that your natural vision might resemble this rich overwhelm of a lens flare.

In translating such an exacting effort into the fluidity of paint, Cheng draws the momentary into the timeless, while also allowing something lighter, broader, freer. Another motif linking these

four paintings is the presence in each of a single poorly hammered nail, either bent or off-kilter. The nails cast shadows that stretch perfectly straight against the various angles of light. As with the walls which are cracked and crumbling, yet deliver sumptuously gradated tones, these nails and their shadows exemplify the intrinsic relations between imperfect bodies and their ambitious spiritual cores. Cheng expresses this as not a binary but rather a genuine duality, not merely a paradox that denigrates imperfection and celebrates the spiritual, but a relationship between the two that recognizes each as integral to the experience of the other.



Ching Ho Cheng, “A Match”, 1978, gouache and airbrush on rag paper

Moving us into the gallery’s main space, three smaller works present incisively graphic scenes. “A Match” (1978) is perhaps the most remarkable of the group, depicting the striking of a match from right to left in a Muybridge-esque stepped animation. Like the tail of a comet, the viewer follows the arcing trail toward the flame’s blue center. Another halo hangs at the highest tip of the flame itself. If we assume, as in “The Studio Lights”, that this halo implies the location of our gaze, then “A Match” is telling us that our eyes have fallen just behind the travelling match head,

or just slower than the speed of light itself. This limitation—the inability to wholly witness the present, always catching up—is a fundamental aspect of Cheng’s engagement with his subject. Though his light paintings are anchored by details that suggest veracity, they maintain a crucial distance from fact and document, being based instead in Cheng’s active participation in generating the observation, such that even the most basic details demand an evaluation as to their potential poetic meanings.

The exhibition culminates in a group of seven paintings from Cheng’s “window” series. Of a piece with the show’s earlier still lifes, these nevertheless eschew the domestic objects and details of deterioration, instead chiefly concerned with the imprint of light itself. Built on powerful combinations of two-tone color chords in angular compositions, one is tempted to examine these paintings as abstractions. However, each implies an incredible amount of concrete information from these few details alone.



Installation view, *Ching Ho Cheng*, David Zwirner, New York, 2021

“Untitled (Window Series)” (1981)—seen at the far left in the installation view above—shows the imprint of a square window, bisected horizontally by its frame into equal halves, with the perspective driven toward the right. The shade is painted in desaturated mint, the light a pale green-tan, suggestive of a mid-afternoon sun. Though the composition is simple and symmetrical, its depiction of the window’s frame bisecting the imprint asks an important question: is this window fully open or fully closed? Again, placing your own body in the space the painting implies, you feel that you hold a complex social relation to the outside world. Is it a choice to be apart from the public sphere, or an imposition? In partaking of Cheng’s fascination

with the ephemeral, the viewer must consider the role of social and class-based conditions that inform the circumstances under which one might meet a moment of stillness.

Two paintings from 1982, “Untitled (Blue, Window Series)” and “Window”^{*} present dramatic color combinations—of a cold early morning and a fiery red sunset, respectively—that heavily underscore these questions. *Ching Ho Cheng* is showing as part of David Zwirner’s *More Life*, a series of eight exhibitions marking the 40th anniversary of the landmark 1981 CDC report on the virus that would eventually come to be known as AIDS. Cheng, who died of AIDS-related causes in 1989, was openly queer all his adult life, though his paintings tend to avoid simplified notions of identification, turning instead toward a more diffuse sense of consciousness. “Untitled (Blue, Window Series)”, and “Window”, present notably fleeting moments in time, attention paid to the apexes of a day’s transitions. Yet each resounds with emotional clarity, the former expressing the searching quality of mourning, the latter burning with a devastating anger. Despite their solitary nature, these works suggest that one cannot be a body apart, one cannot transcend the crisis of a time and a place. Cheng’s revelation is to see, in passing solitude, enduring connections to the world, simultaneously through and beyond the self.

—*Morgan Võ, 2021*

Notes

[*Ching Ho Cheng*](#) was shown at David Zwirner, NYC, from Sep. 17-Oct. 23, 2021.

^{*} “Untitled (Blue, Window Series)” (1982) and “Window” (1982) can be seen in the installation view above, second and third from the left, respectively.