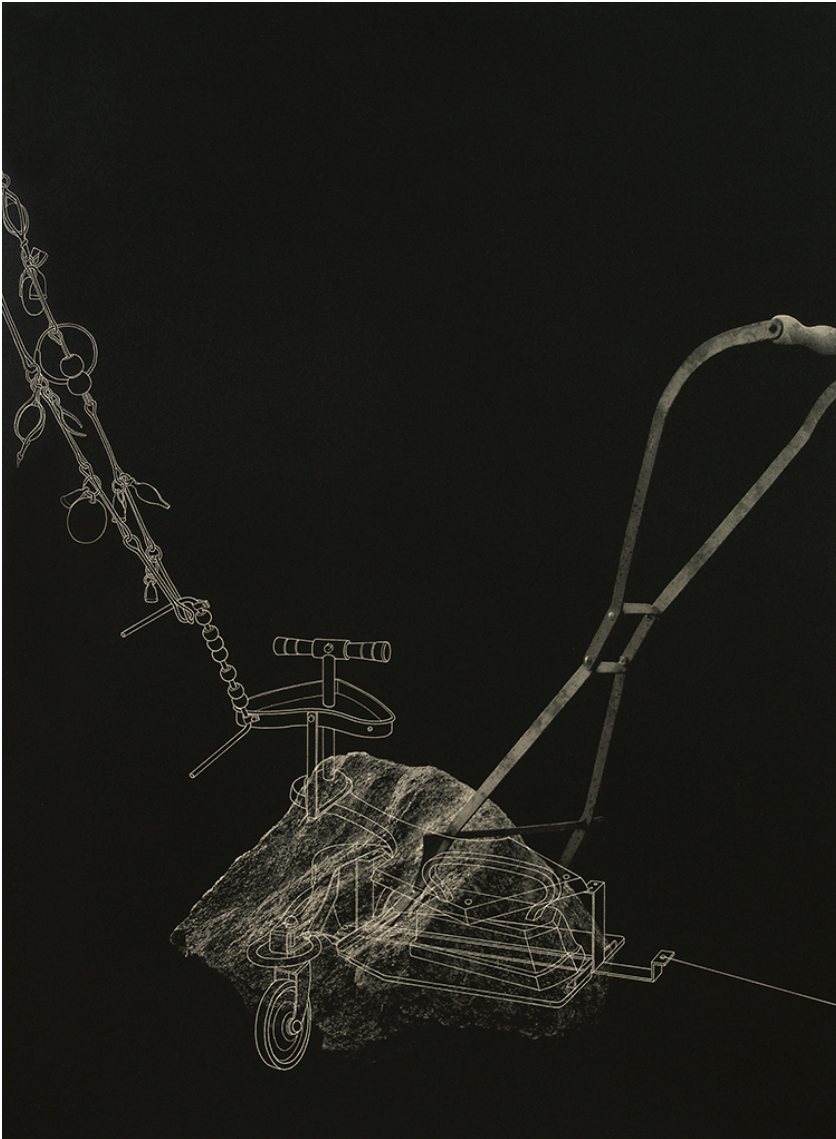


## ***Picturing States of Affairs: The Art of Phillip Chen***

Phillip Chen's art portrays the dynamics of memory – how it shapes the present. Each work occasions an interaction between appearance, reality and record. Within the flat space of the picture plane, personal reflections, cultural objects and historical narratives intertwine and recombine in a dizzying array, creating the space of memory. Because of its virtuoso play with the cultural signification of multiple visual languages, Chen's work provides an encounter *platform* that deepens our understanding of how we read the visual.

In Chen's prints, medium and image collapse into one indissoluble visual experience. Unlike art whose goal is to create a single view of history, in Chen's work diverse meanings arise from distinct images systems. And each method of representing becomes part of the voice of the representation. For instance, the seemingly negative or empty space of the black background is in fact the positive applied layer of ink. It is the delicate linework and the photographic half tone that are the raw paper underneath. Often in artworks, the constructedness of the image is meant to be unnoticed. Instead, imagistic realism is seen as a gesture of "pointing at," or calling attention to, a particular object existing in three dimensions. But Chen's images do more: they point outward to an existing object and also to themselves as coded markers recording that object. This is similar to the Heart Sutra saying: "Guided by the finger, gaze at the moon, the finger is not the moon." While a cursory reading might interpret this to mean 'look only at the moon and not at the finger,' the verse's distinction of the two has been more delicately comprehended as discerning both.

Seen in a glance, Chen's combination of images is unfathomable, destabilizing interpretation through so many disparate objects and different ways of telling. The dark velvety ground conjures up photographic images, accompanied by schemata, grids and mathematical equations, and is spliced by arabesque lines slicing the blackness in their wake. In *Souvenirs of the Voyage*, a photograph of a large rock, a line drawing of a Dogon chain, and a schematic image of a baby stroller jostle against one another as each asserts its own code and history. But Chen's is not the surrealism of a "fortuitous encounter on a dissection table of an umbrella and a sewing machine..." His choices, however incongruous they might first appear, are neither arbitrary nor accidental. Chen's collaging is a purposive selection of signifying elements. Each print deliberately constructs a network out of disparate signs, becoming the site of intersection of numerous visual communication systems. Unpacking his works meanings doesn't demand erudition or scholarship but instead asks for a willingness to look, to allow associations to gain primacy over classification and for interpretations to remain open.



*Souvenirs of the Voyage* (2006, 31 X 23 in. relief etching)

Different ways of conceptualizing the world require different visual languages. Contradictory systems overlap, colliding and interpenetrating in each of Chen's prints. His art gives voice to competing ways of recording and viewing history. And, after all, why should widely divergent worldviews, incompatible systems of power, be expected to be coded in the same manner?

But our era likes signs, and it likes them to be very clear; we exalt the precision of templates and rubrics. Chen's art is more confounding: aspects of history which we have imagined to be distinctly compartmentalized once again encounter each other – as they did in reality. But their association takes us by surprise, it's disorienting. Chen shows this friction as dynamic, creating ruptures that dislodge us from our comforting clichés about the past. His art requires our participation in the process of making meanings and reworking our histories.

Wittgenstein said, “don’t think, but look!” not to de-emphasize ideas in art but to reorder our inclination to pre-think before looking at what is actually shown. Looking first lets us see new possibilities being created. It leads to viewing art, not with a passive eye, but in an embodied encounter.

## Time

The past is neither finished nor feeble but a riot of possibilities that threaten to unfold. Stuart Hall discussed how, far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past “which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure ourselves into eternity,” we are instead “positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.” The power of the past lies in the story we tell of it in the present: it is inseparable from the story of us, now. And that story is not linear, nor complete: each new insight rips through previous ways of telling. Thinly covered by a dominant narrative, new versions interpreting the past can be only temporally restrained before they cease being submerged and assert their presence; their force displaces the narrative that overlaid them.



*Prairie Breaker* (2002, 23 X 31 in. relief etching)



Any record of the past occurs in present time. Chen emphasizes that his art embodies “the idea of collapsing time, the idea of the past being now.” Embedded in this is the idea of yi wu. Art historian Wu Hung defined the term: “any object that points to the past is an yi wu because it is a surviving portion of a vanished whole; by arrangement or accident, it has been severed from its original context to become part of contemporary culture. An yi wu is thus characterized both by pastness and contemporaneity: it originated in the past, but it belongs to the here and now.” While not itself a past object, Chen’s artworks reveal the vital presentness of artifacts. This presentness is explicit in *Prairie Breaker*. Our eyes are drawn first to the photographic fragment of a simple unadorned Woodland pot on the lower left of the picture plane. It rests motionlessly in its own space, almost buried in the deep black ink Chen uses as his ground. Above it swirls a host of various images. These move as if they had been tightly coiled and are just now released: as our eyes scan across the paper from left to right, the objects appear to move faster and become broader, clearer. Our gaze follows the trajectory of the curving pattern formed by ever more complex implements: Chen’s sinuous line becomes surveyor’s chains, then harvesting machines, and drafting tools. They hover above the pot, threatening its sanctuary with their tumbling dance. A tension radiating from them into the blackness between renders them no longer innocuous and merely utilitarian. Among these schematically rendered objects, a pickaxe emerges, conspicuous through its photographic rendering, mirroring that of the Woodland pot. Departing from the spiraling boarder, it penetrates into the inky quiet of the middle space surrounding the pot, poised to smash it. Through Chen’s presentation, history is not linear but becomes seen as a kind of cross-section: things from different times in the American landscape are not imagined as a succession but are gathered here, vying for the same space. But then he disrupts this reading with another. The entire work reads as a depiction of the cosmos: the pocked surface of the pot as also a moon or planet and the linear diagrams as a constellation swirling with planets and stars. His deep black ink covers the paper with a texture of velvet, an almost infinite depth. It takes us from human culture and temporal history into cosmology. And neither reading subsumes the other.

## Space

Print media is called the democratic art, but never has the content been so democratic as in Chen’s depictions – objects from disparate times and places appear together, enmeshed in the same matrix of space.

In *Fiji Mermaid*, the circus tent spike forcibly links the various artifacts by a rope – dragging them into the same spatial frame, towing a costumed Chinese hat and a Native American choker into a visual and spatial equality with abstract line drawings of sea creatures.



*Fiji Mermaid* (2005, 31 X 23 in. relief etching)

Wittgenstein seems almost to anticipate Chen's work in his description of a picture as a "complicated network overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail. I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than 'family resemblances.'" Chen's images utilize such "family resemblance," forming alliances through visible continuities and likenesses and then shattering them, breaking them apart through disruptions and inconsistencies of visual codes.

In *Mounting the Machine*, both the photograph and the schema coexist in the same airless shallow space and repeat the same form: similar radial lines weave in and over one another. The bicycle portrayed in photographic realism appears more concrete than the diagrammatic drawing of the accoutrements foisted on women in the 19th century: the fan, the bustle, the parasol. Yet through their linear elements they become intermixed - the photographic spokes of the bicycle's tire, at the bottom left of the print, become entangled with the drawn lines describing the ribs of the bustle, while similar diagrammatic lines break away near the center to form a fan. Towards the top of the artwork, the lines become increasingly sparse and schematic: the attenuated ribs of a no-longer-functional parasol seem to fly apart. Chen's entire elaborate structure breaks apart even as it is constructed; linear rigidity collapses in a whirlwind of fractured forms as the bicycle machinery spirals forward. The freedom offered by this vehicle, forgotten in our time of rapid cars and Concord jets, comes into view again in Chen's print. Women's subjection and all its accompanying paraphernalia are shattered: umbrella, bustle, fan – they are flung away, spiraling into ever more pale, more ghostly portrayal. As the bicycle bursts into the scene, it forces them all to be shed and asserts its momentous victory.



*Mounting the Machine* (2003, 31 X 23 in. relief etching)

## Paper Culture

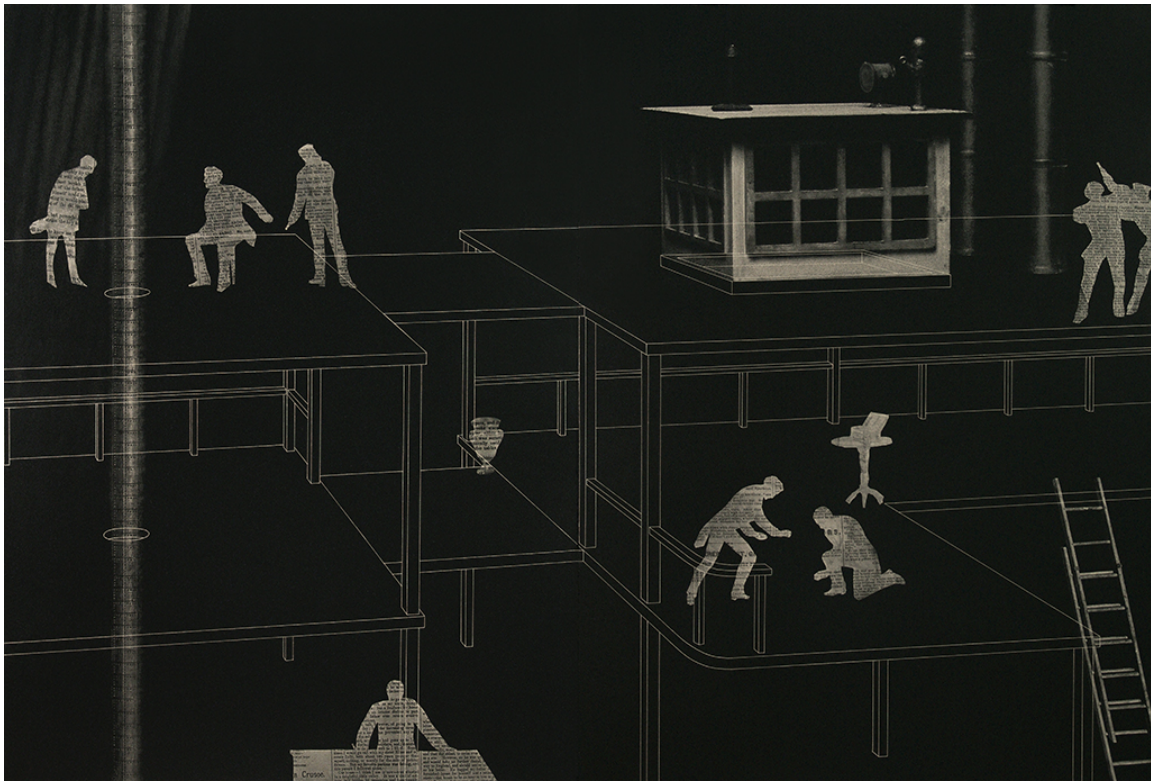
Chen's work reminds us that the first photographers accurately saw their work not as an act of replicating objects but, as William Henry Fox Talbot stated as early as 1839, as "the art of fixing a shadow." Although the photographic image recalls the three-dimensional object, it resolutely inhabits the same two-dimensional reality as lines and graphs and equations. In sharing this airless space, artifact, equations, and ciphers are revealed as all equally culpable in construing and promulgating historical events.

Chen's art gives precise voice to a plethora of visual languages: derived from the fine arts, from documentary photography, from diagrams, architecture, even including figures conceived through mathematical formulae. All are seen to have their own historical voice and affinities with systems of power. As Michael A. Fuller observed in regard to text, even the plainest one cannot escape the problem of the commitments made by its language. Similarly, Chen is aware of associations with each visual language and uses each mark intentionally as a member of that language set. But in his work, the collision of these alternative ways of categorizing memory, history, the present, engenders a collusion – their voices are unified and intensified through sharing the medium of paper.

And Chen shows us exactly that. Through the diptych *Men of Action*, he creates a world that not only exists exclusively within the confines of paper but leads us to the fundamental insight that paper is how we know most things in the world. It is not just the medium but is also the matrix of knowledge, inseparable from the meaning. For centuries, understanding of the world has been shaped by paper. Most often, in our lives we do not experience other nations, we have not known other cultures except through reading about them or seeing them illustrated. In Chen's *Men of Action*, the figures, all male, are ciphers, paper dolls. Constructed of newspaper, then photographed, etched into metal plates and printed, they are complete embodiments of media, as well as embodied by media. Dressed in 19th century Western attire, they appear in acts of diplomacy, statesmanship, discord, all conducted within the grid-like schematic architecture of a steamship. In the past their actions, their negotiations, were known and publicized through the newspaper articles. Wryly, Chen builds their reality for us out of the newspaper. How flimsy they are and yet what enormous consequences such paper constructions have had in actuality!

Chen's artworks move between objects, images, notation and ratios, to the conceptual ideas we have with our world. He depicts ways we record and archive thought and history, collapsing spatial and temporal realities into one picture plane. Through visual affinities he shows that tradition reframed becomes innovation, because the past is never read but re-constructed. Through his play with visual languages, we become aware of the powerful force of memory in constructing the present.





*Men of Action* (2009, 31 X 46 in. relief etching)

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