

Compelled to Know More
John Kuo Wei Tchen

These gorgeous relief prints are elegant—shades of gray breaking the luscious black ink. Phillip Chen's visuals are full of objects, lines, and anecdotes. The artist tweaks and cajoles us Magritte style— "Ceci n'est pas un pipe." How to decipher them?

These objects have belonged to a past childhood, a past era, and to our hands; they matter. "There is something about the heft of things, the smell of them, the texture of them that compel me to know more," says Chen. They are an ongoing set of explorations by an artist probing the dark emotional terrain of his life, the lives of his father and uncles, of colonial contact and conflict. They are of a China and an Africa with an Americas. They are of his beloved daughters and wife. How does he make sense of these fragments, print by print? Chen's approach is forensic-like, ever searching for bits and pieces of meaning in anything that strikes his imagination and his sensitivities. Through trial and error, item-by-shard, Chen juxtaposes, layers, position his objects and drawings into displays that convey sets of ideas. He condenses these complexities, these tangles, flattening them onto a two-dimensional plane—making a memoryscape of time/place, a schema of meaning.

Memory Prints: The Story World of Phillip Chen is a glorious homecoming of sorts. Chen's prints get at the historical soul of what it has meant and can mean to be a Chinese American in a society that had excluded all but a few Chinese. Chen is a descendant and a survivor of survivors. He takes in the violations and violence, imagines what the experience must have felt like, and transmutes what has been silenced and ephemeral into visuals we can see and feel.

I.

Phillip Chen is one of the few artists who explore the wounded impossibility of being a Chinese American within the disavowed history of US Chinese Exclusion Act culture. And yet, Chen's vision is expansive and epic. It is not contained by the pain and bitterness of the past. We enter an American "heart of darkness" and wrestle with the demons therein.

Kuo Chung's Release serves as a core story. Chen has combined two stories. One is the tale of gold miners tying the queue of a "Chinaman" to a heavy rock and throwing him in a river as a joke. The other is a family story of his great grandfather, a fortune seeker in the foothills of Oroville, known as a great swimmer.

His queue snagged underwater trapping him in watery grave. But a knife cutting his queue liberates him from death (and also from the allegiance to the Manchu Qing Dynasty). With the swipe of a sharp edge, the items below the stone, rope, and queue are suddenly exploded—the gold measuring scale, a wooden water bucket, a rocker to sift gold nuggets.

In this telling, the print *Kuo Chung's Release* is a story of agency and possibility. Visually, the tools of work are smashed under the cut rope and the cut queue—becoming detritus at the bottom of water. The upper space is empty. Kuo Chung has escaped the frame. He has moved on to some other destination.



Kuo Chung's Release (2000, 31 X 23 in. relief etching)

II.

Phillip Chen regularly uses mathematical symbols to deepen and to make his visuals more concise. Such symbols serve to compact layers of meanings. The vinculum, the line used for grouping and in fractions, appears regularly. His multiple uses of the vinculum gets at abstraction, as well as paradoxically very personal, social-cultural family dynamics.

My Father and Dillinger is fascinating in its simple shorthand. To the far right is a composite of schematics of Chinese restaurant objects. It can be a game to pick them out. Subtly underneath the jumble is a carefully hung suit jacket and an apron, and faintly on the ground sits a brimmed hat. “What is it to know someone?” Chen asks. This ensemble of impersonal things can only represent Phillip Chen’s father, a waiter at the Jade Cafe—a paper son of a paper son. The false stories told to get around the US Chinese Exclusion Laws.

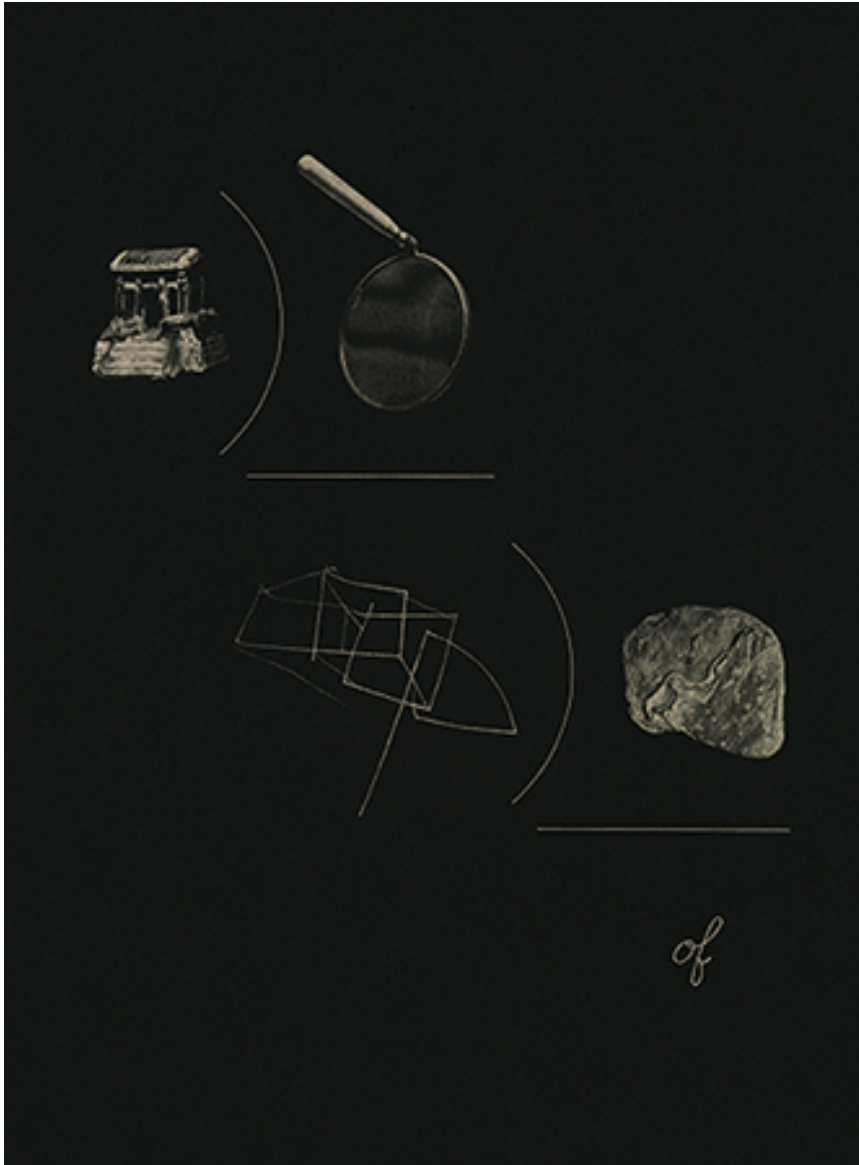
In the 1930s, Chen’s father was the celebrity gangster’s personal waiter while Dillinger was getting plastic surgery. Cleverly, Chen uses the vinculum as a divisor, imagining how a man constantly in the public eye perceived his father, the server of Chinese food. “Conventional ways of drawing . . . might be a more dreamlike part of the work and not the photo,” Chen tells me.



My Father and Dillinger (2011, 32 X 46 in. relief etching)

The jumbled restaurant man who is his father becomes reduced to a covered platter from Column A. The platter divided into the unconscious mind of Dillinger under general anesthesia = squiggled abstract lines—the unknowable. Chen comments: “This was the only way I felt I could get a glimmer of who my distant father was.”

Extraction is about Chen's beloved mother. Counter-intuitively, perhaps the most personal of all his prints, it is the most mathematically abstracted. The miniature house, what his mother placed in a beloved evergreen flowerpot, forever sparks his imagination. The meaning of the word "extraction" can be best understood as a line of descent—literally being "of" such and such. His creative spirit is literally of the all-pervasive figure outside the frame of the print, his mom.



Extraction (2006, 31 X 23 in. relief etching)

The artist is of an Excluded generation of men—the son of a WWII veteran and his brothers. The father benefited from the 1945 War Brides Act and returned to China to marry a Chinese Christian. Seeking to understand his own extraction, necessarily compelled Chen to also understand, and reckon with, how they navigated their own lives.



Sargasso Sea – Superfluous Things (2010, 62 X 31 in. relief etching)
III.

In “Sargasso Sea,” Chen reveals not only his fascination with the past, but his awareness to the endless play of possibilities. He pursues the ongoing task of re-assembling, literally re-member-ing receding childhoods. His daughters’ playthings, cast off as they got older, are here caught within a giant seaweed in the northern Atlantic gyre, a vortex where floating kelp, but also mankind’s detritus, is concentrated and breaks down into

molecular components. Their time, as that of his and his siblings, as that of his deceased father and his brothers, as for us all, is moving inexorably with this flow.

Intergenerational “postmemory” is one way to understand Phillip Chen’s print series. Given the forced survivors’ silence of not talking about one’s true name and of keeping secrets in a place one wants to stay, yet legally and culturally excludes one’s being, this cumulative, charged void drives this artist’s search for plausible expressible insights.

Postmemory is an “imaginative investment and creation.” It “characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor received.” Artists, writers, performers grappling with postmemory creatively transform these evacuations into cultural spaces that can help us explore, feel, and understand.

IV.

As viewers of Phillip Chen’s prints, we gain access to a world mainstream America has not recognized nor reckoned with. What happens to a people when they are both legally and cultural excluded and marginalized from a place, an ideal, a nation, a modernity, a technology of progress they seek to be a part of?

These prints challenge viewers to look and ask. “The authority, the dominance, the control—the question is who gets to write the master narrative?” Rather than escaping and being forever unresolved, Phillip Chen faces these historical demons. He delves into family stories and turns them over and around. They become larger stories—epic in scope and historical understanding. A queue cut, a ganster, where discarded toys go, and all those small and all those small tsochkes are related and matter. Knowing these seemingly “superfluous things,” Phillip Chen is reclaiming what has been tossed away of the past so he, and we, might become something better. We are all compelled to investigate more.

John Kuo Wei Tchen is the curator of *Memory Prints: The Story World of Phillip Chen*. Professor Tchen is the founding director of the A/P/A (Asian Pacific American) Studies Program and Institute at New York University. He co-founded MoCA in 1979-80 where he continues to serve as senior historian.