

## The Quiet Force of Gracious Paradox: Photo-etchings by Phillip Chen

Michael Kowalski

*How can I trust the tile oracle to tell me the day of return?*

Lu Yu (陆游)<sup>1</sup>

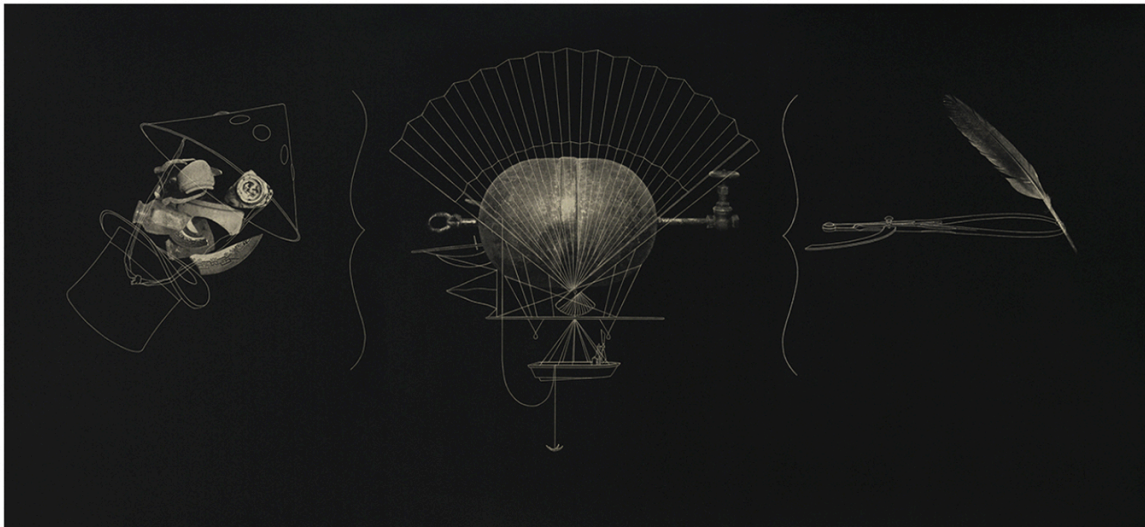
The shaman broke tiles and tried to predict the future on the basis of the way they shattered. A group of shattered crockery in the left panel of Phillip Chen's triptych *Powhatan; Gunboat Diplomacy* is enclosed by European and Asian hats which seem to compress the fragments into a unity, but this unity resembles nothing other than a skyrocket about to explode. The composite image in the center panel of the triptych suggests some sort of physically impossible equilibrium, and indeed the right panel, which one had hoped would balance the solid shards of crockery on the left, turns out to be as light as a feather. What is the shaman trying to tell us? Is he trying to show us how to upset the laws of physics? tell a story for which words don't suffice? rewrite the history of Occident and Orient? make pictures which refuse to settle either inside or outside? Is he looking into the future, learning from the past, or trying to grasp the impossible instant between the two?

*Powhatan; Gunboat Diplomacy* embodies many of the recurrent themes in Phillip Chen's photo-etchings: the delicate balance between mimesis and abstract design, the

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<sup>1</sup> Lu Yu (陆游) (1125-1210 CE) was a poet in the Southern Sung style. This line is spoken by a wife lamenting a long separation from her husband. The poem, written around 1193 CE, is given the title "Separation" in the English translation by Burton Watson. It is taken from volume 25 of the collection of Lu Yu's poetry, *Chien-nan shih-kao* (劍南詩稿 / [宋] 陸游 撰). See Burton Watson, trans., *The Old Man Who Does as He Pleases: Selections from the Poetry and Prose of Lu Yu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), p. 43.

simultaneity of synthesis and fragmentation, the unstable relationship of positive to negative, and the fertile zone of the ideograph, where the distinction between drawing and writing is blurred. Chen's decision to install *Powhatan* near the center of the exhibition provides the viewer with a pivot point or axis: the suggestion of a center of gravity for his arrangement of variously weighted groups of individual prints. From such a vantage point it's possible to imagine the entire exhibition as one giant work whose philosophical narrative and principles of composition can be experienced in microcosm within each individual frame.



*Powhatan - Gunboat Diplomacy*

The title of Chen's triptych, *Powhatan; Gunboat Diplomacy*, is doubly resonant. *Powhatan* was indeed the name of Commodore Matthew Perry's flagship during his aggressive "visit" to Huangpu ( 黄埔区) in 1853, but it was also the name of the federation of tribes who were among the first Native Americans to actively resist European colonizers in the 1600s. The iconography of the triptych is even more complex and ironic than its title. The explosive juxtaposition of the Western diplomat's top hat

with the Vietnamese peasant's conical *nón lá* stands in improbable and precarious balance with a feather. The feather itself seems to want to fly off the picture plane and is only restrained by the violent grip of a pair of calipers. Is the violence of this grasp necessary to keep the potential explosion of the left panel in check? Or are the forged steel prongs of the calipers really grasping a feather quill pen, poised to write? The prongs themselves resemble the metal pen points which replaced feather quills in Western writing early in the 1800s. Is a political treaty about to be negotiated? No. This panel of the triptych, in spite of being almost weightless, remains curiously immobile. Any impulse to write is stymied by the silent violence of a paralyzing tension. The image may seem to want to transcribe a message for us, but it's prevented from doing so on its own terms as a picture.

*Powhatan's* central panel is an even stronger example of Chen's ability to create dreamlike, composite images which simultaneously invite and resist interpretation. The photographic image of a compressed gas tank seems to anchor the center of the triptych with its mass and texture, but the asymmetry of the tank's exterior pipe-work weakens the initial impression of stability. The photo's very identity as a tank is compromised by the corroded surface, suggestive of stone as much as metal. A close study of the artist's varied repertoire of photographic images will lead the viewer down many such paths of observation and speculation, paths full of illuminating surprises and subtle twists. But no matter how deftly one reads the photos, one must abandon the comforting notion that objects will necessarily stand for themselves in Chen's supra-logical realm of unstable symbols. In the center panel of *Powhatan* the photo nearly loses its identity in a mesh of elegant, superimposed drawings. The resulting composite image is half-solid, half-

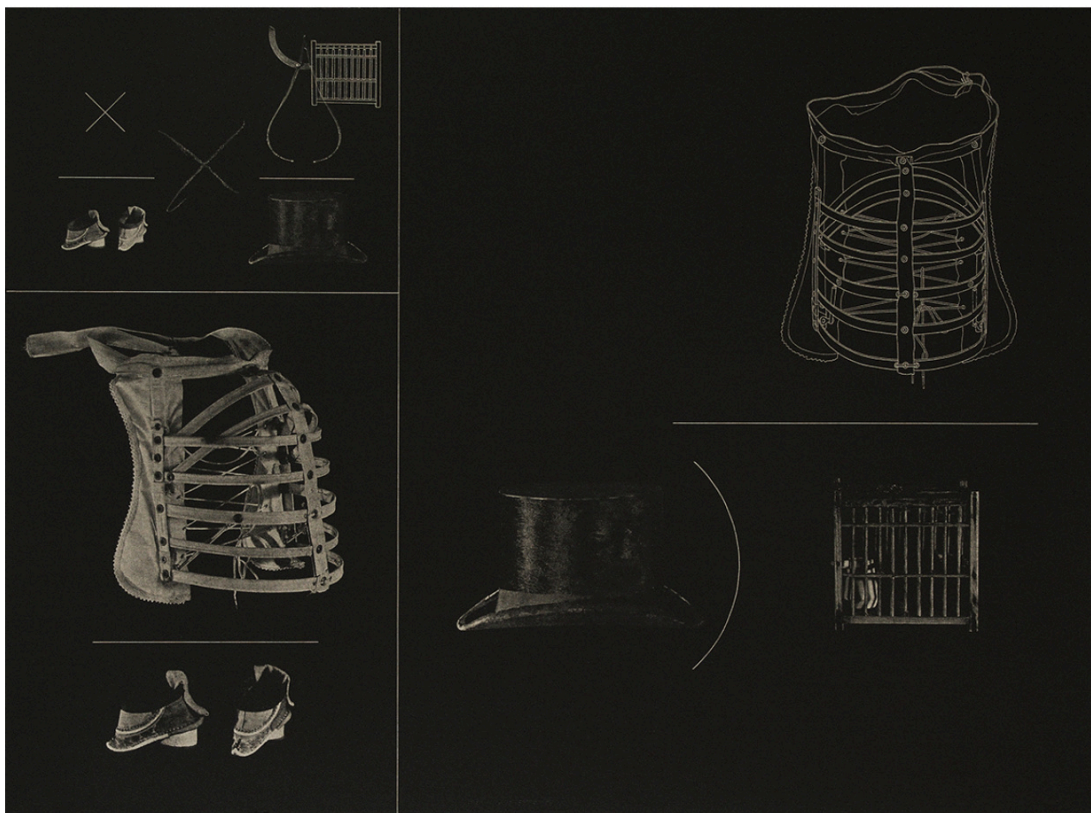
transparent, half-concrete, half-ideal. A giant fan opens to greet the air, but of what use is a fan with no mass? Much to our surprise, the image of this weightless fan succeeds in neutralizing the ominous mass of the tank. The hinge of the fan draws our gaze downward. What appears to be the gondola of a hot air balloon is suspended below the tank. Of course it's a rather odd hot air balloon whose gas container is heavy and while its gondola is weightless. On the other hand, our supposed gondola resembles nothing other than a small dinghy supporting an impossibly large sail with implausibly eccentric rigging. Whether this extra-logical construction is a hot air balloon or a seafaring vessel, one is tempted to take some comfort in the fact that it's anchored. Unfortunately for the viewer seeking equilibrium in the center panel, Chen's depiction of the dangling anchor is clearly off-center. Our vessel is listing to port. The fact that the drawings superimposed on the tank constitute a network of stable, intersecting triangles might have reassured us that the center panel is, after all, up to the task of balancing the whole triptych, but Chen confronts us with one final paradox, perhaps his most subtly disturbing: the vertices of the interlocking triangles near the center of the panel produce not one but several candidates for the true center of the piece. The hinge of the fan might have been an obvious choice, but it turns out that there are at least two other points that could serve equally well as a fulcrum for the center panel, and—distressing to say—neither one of them balances the triptych as a whole. Or do they? If they do, then we've entered a universe of unbalanced equilibrium. Cezanne and the Cubists have taken us there before, but Chen adds a new dimension: the mystery of his secret writing.



The feather in the right panel can neither float away nor send a message. As we've already observed, it seems paralyzed. But perhaps the quill's job is already done: two large curly braces } { have been written into the composition at the junctures of the panels. At first glance their great size allows the braces to function as purely graphical elements, but we're trained to interpret such signs as logical operators, and such a habit can't be denied for long. But it should come as no surprise that, in Chen's world, even logical operators are multivalent. In the terminology of computer science, the symbol of the brace is *overloaded*: it acts differently depending on how you define its context. Taken individually, the braces serve to unify the contents of their respective outer panels. The message seems to be, "integrate the disparate elements of this panel." But if one interprets the two braces as a single logical operator, then an entirely different effect is achieved. The pair of braces which is traditionally used to enclose the elements of a set { } has been flipped outward: } { . The resulting message seems to be, "*disassociate* these panels!" It's as if the panels are being pushed apart. On the other hand, the points of the braces do lead the eye from the periphery back to the center, so perhaps a tight binding of the panels is implied after all. We are confronted with a kind of quantum mechanics of art, the point being not to settle on any one interpretation, but rather to keep moving among several.

Mathematical notation merges with iconography in Chen's *Means and Extremes*. Each image in this work has its own story to tell: the shoes for bound feet (纏足), the calipers, the top hat, the nineteenth-century bustle, the coal miner's canary cage. But rather than tell these stories, Chen sets their respective icons in motion within the

confines of his graphical laboratory: the artist seems to be testing the theorems of a curious, fuzzy logic. What can it mean to divide a canary cage by a top hat? Is the result (a woman's bustle) the same regardless of whether it's expressed as a drawing (upper right) or as a photograph (lower left)? In a departure from his usual precise rendering, Chen roughly sketches a multiplication sign in the upper left corner. The impression is that of an exploration worked out hastily on the blackboard. There is no time to be neat in the rush of speculation. The metaphysician has outlined an argument in an hermetic notation. It remains for the viewer to complete the exercise at home.



*Means and Extremes*

Writing continues to inform Chen's graphic design in *Fiji Mermaid*, but in a radically different way. Like so many of Chen's prints, *Fiji Mermaid* evokes the tragic

history of colonialism. The historical "Fiji Mermaid" was an exhibit in a show of exotics and "freaks of nature" produced in the mid-nineteenth century by P.T. Barnum for the amusement of North American city dwellers. In Chen's version the wooden spike in the lower right corner anchors an imaginary tent where Barnum's exhibition of freaks will be taking place. The upper half of the print comprises a collection of the type artifacts Barnum would have been showing: a lance and a bone choker from a Native American tribe, a Central African broad knife, and a Vietnamese peasant's *nón lá*. But these photographic images are entangled in Chen's sinuous renderings of sea life, leaving the viewer with a vague foreboding. Just as the long tresses of the mythical mermaids were said to draw navigators to their doom on rocky shoals, perhaps we should be wary too, lest our curiosity turn prurient. Once again the images both invite and defy integration into a narrative, and, once again, Chen flatters us with his confidence in our ability to make the best of a contradiction.

We've already considered Chen's ingenious deployment of icons to tell a meta-story in *Powhatan* and *Means and Extremes*. *Fiji Mermaid* takes the connection to writing one step further. At first the solid objects in the upper half of the composition seem to constitute a still life floating in space. Then they coalesce. Chen's transparent overlay of aquatic life, which initially seemed to float above the photographs, penetrates them and knits the entire arrangement into a monstrous organism of baroque eccentricity. The carefully calibrated, narrow tonal range of Chen's prints keeps the resulting composition balanced delicately between assemblage and, surprisingly, *painting*. As flexible as the art of printmaking may be, it is not normally thought of as a painterly



medium. My observation springs from the way the artist creates the broad, dramatic diagonal that defines the upper half of the work. This is not a simple matter of line, nor of collage, but of the expert use of layering and juxtaposition to create tonally varied, complex volumes. This tactic of drawing-by-juxtaposition may not be unique to Chen, but I know of no one who does better, not even Rauschenberg. The spectacularly rich, painterly texture of Chen's *Take Waking* should serve to make my point.



*Take Waking*

If the entire upper half of *Fiji Mermaid* is viewed in this light, that is, as a single, bold, diagonal brushstroke, the composition begins to function as an enormous ideograph.

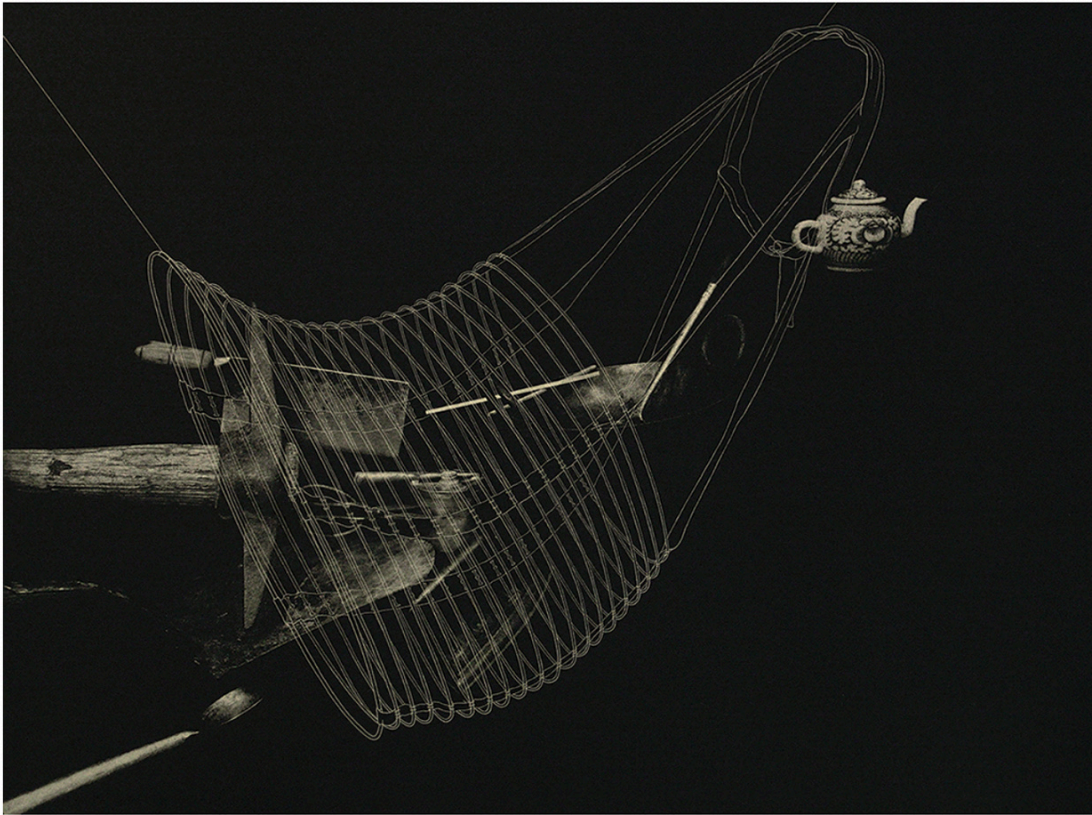
Without assuming that Chen was thinking explicitly of Chinese radicals during his compositional process, it's impossible not to notice the affinity of his bold forms with the



*Fiji Mermaid*

basic strokes of Chinese calligraphy. *Fiji Mermaid* calls to mind the radical *bing* ( 冫 ice, cold). The strength of the radical *bi* ( 匕 spoon, ladle) informs *Acoustic Shadow* and *Nearer to the Brutes*, as the graceful arcs of the radical *xi* ( 夕 evening) seem to animate Chen's *Flower Water*.





*Flower Water*

All of the works in this exhibition stand poised between light and dark, the positive and the negative. A cursory examination of the bowl in *Evergreen* reveals it to be a positive photographic image. On the other hand, we associate dark grounds with negative images, and indeed the fact that *Evergreen's* transparent, floating, disassembled table is inscribed in light lines on a dark ground reinforces the impression that the composition as a whole is a negative image. The issue is further confused by the fact that the artist has not selected dark paper on which to print, but has taken considerable care to print a flawless matte surface on tan paper. If this is a negative composition, it's not the

passive negative of photographic film, but an active, willfully induced negativity. The question remains as to how positive photographic images can stay positive in an



*Evergreen*

optical context which is so biased toward darkness and the absence of volume. Perhaps they can't. The play of light on the table, the hatchet, and the plant, for instance, is muted and ambiguous. These images can be read as either positive or negative. Alternatively, they could be read as *both* positive and negative, or, more shockingly, as *neither* positive nor negative. After all, there seems to be no light source here. What does it mean when

forms are illuminated but cast no shadows? Have we entered the philosophical realm of Plato's ideal forms? If so, then how can we account for the banal image of a dollar bill?

Phillip Chen does not shout, but neither does he whisper. In a measured voice he invites us to confront and embrace the inadequacies of logical viewing. In Chen's world darkness prevails and light shines at the same moment. The stone floats and the feather is still. The parts become whole while the whole breaks up into parts. The viewer approaches the work and perceives an assemblage of familiar and mysterious objects. Is it a riddle? Suddenly the elegance and technical precision of the work overwhelms the eye. Are we in the presence of a graphic composition so brilliant that real objects end up disappearing into their abstract geometry? No, for just as abstract form begins to overwhelm the image of the humble teapot, the teapot begins to tell a story of simple pleasures and the sadness of loss. In the end we discover that it's impossible to distinguish these various ways of knowing which at first seemed so distinct. At this point the encounter with Phillip Chen's work begins.

Composer and essayist Michael Kowalski is collaborating with the Brazilian writer Helena Soares Hungria on a chamber opera, *A Ascensão e a Queda do Primeiro Mundo* (*The Rise and Fall of the First World*). His writings have appeared in *Perspectives of New Music*, the *Computer Music Journal*, and *Critical Review*.