



Windsong VII, 1987, charcoal, graphite, and pastel on torn rag paper
32" x 24" (81.3 x 61 cm)

CHING HO CHENG (1946-1989)

At a time when Asian-Americans were nearly absent from the contemporary art scene, Ching ho Cheng was highly regarded by peers and by prominent art historians such as Gert Schiff and Henry Geldzahler, the first curator of twentieth-century art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Both men were close friends of Cheng's and promoted and owned his work. Cheng exhibited his work extensively in New York and overseas.

When in New York City—Cheng often traveled abroad—he resided at the landmark Chelsea Hotel during its edgiest, wildest, star-studded time and once lived in the room that had been occupied by Arthur Miller and Marilyn Monroe. During Cheng's time there, the exclusive roster of residents included Henry Geldzahler, artists Larry Rivers, David Hockney, Vali Myers, and Richard Bernstein, fashion designer Charles James, and rock star Dee Dee Ramone among other notables. Cheng, a regular of Max's Kansas City, was also friendly with Debbie Harry and Bette Midler. Rosa von Praunheim filmed Cheng in his Chelsea Hotel studio for his award-winning film, *Tally Brown, New York* (1979), a documentary about Brown, a Warhol superstar who was a close friend of Cheng's.

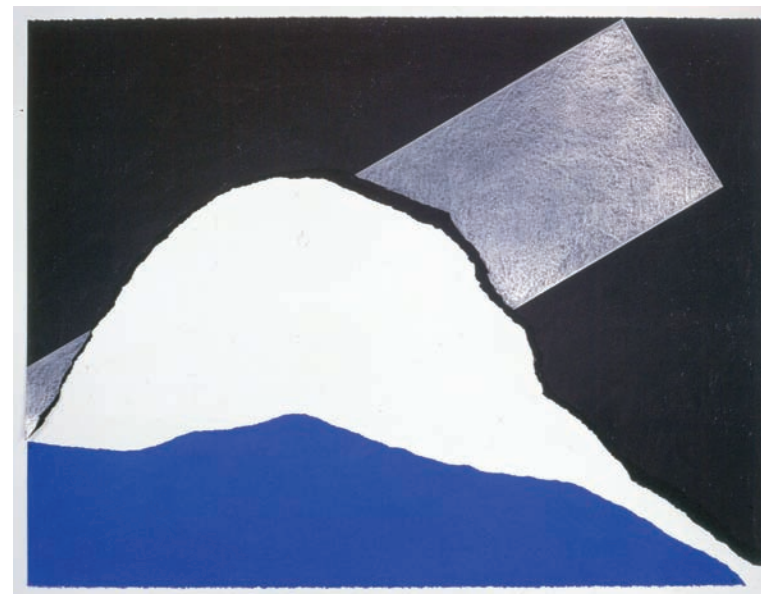
In the 70s, his Chelsea Hotel studio surroundings became subjects for airbrushed gouaches so delicate they appear as whispers of paint on paper. In these works, he captured the essence of ordinary objects such as his studio window (see lower right), light switches, and peeling paint. Highly sensitive to his environs, Cheng found beauty and spirituality in the most mundane objects. He was also fascinated by auras and light, which for him symbolized the afterlife.

In the early 80s, a new period of his art emerged when, in frustration, he tore a drawing he found inadequate—a meticulous artist, Cheng destroyed works that were not up to his standards. From this one transformative act evolved his stunning body of tom works. He realized that the process of tearing paper was simultaneously constructive and destructive. Featured in the exhibition is the wall-sized "Interrupted Text," a tom work created in collaboration with poet David Rattray. Rattray wrote original poetry in black ink on paper specially prepared by Cheng and then torn; its partial destruction irrevocably transformed the text. His collaboration with Rattray was inspired by Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953), the result of a collaboration between those two artists. Another highlight, *Windsong VII* (see left), is representative of the artist's interest in regeneration (the egg form) and symbolism (blue representing spirituality; green, rebirth) which was partly informed by his study of ancient cultures.

Cheng developed his alchemical—rust or copper oxide—pieces in the 80s after a trip to Turkey. There the texture of the caves and grottos inspired him and led to his exploration of the oxidation process. Cheng innovatively created organic elements on paper, and later on canvas, as abstractions. He was fascinated by rust and its permanence, texture, and depth. In addition to the physical properties of rust he explored its spiritual properties. One of these magical pieces is an untitled triptych on canvas (see *Untitled*, panels I, II, and III on reverse). The curved shapes in these panels symbolized passageways to the next realm, the afterlife, which so concerned Cheng throughout his career.

Cheng was born in Cuba where his father was a highly respected diplomat. His extended family in China was among the wealthiest and most prominent and respected families in the country. Cheng's revered great aunt, Soumay Cheng, was a trailblazer in China—the first female lawyer and judge, and the first Chinese lawyer ever to practice at the French court in Shanghai. As a youth, she was active in the Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist Party) during the revolution that eventually overthrew the ruling Manchu dynasty. She traveled with suitcases full of explosives destined for the Kuomintang's clandestine stash of munitions, and sponsored secret meetings at her home. She married Wei-tao Ming, a prominent diplomat and politician, who served as governor of Taiwan Province, minister of foreign affairs, vice premier and finance minister, among other important posts. Cheng's family moved to New York in 1951. He lived in Kew Gardens, Queens, and studied at the Cooper Union School of Art in the mid-1960s. His first one-man show took place in Amsterdam in 1976, and his first in New York followed a year later at the Gloria Cortella Gallery.

—Leanne Zalewski



The Certainty of Blue IX, 1984, charcoal, graphite, and pastel on torn rag paper, 38 1/2" x 50" (97 x 127 cm)



Untitled, Window series, 1982, gouache on rag board, 30" x 40" (76.2 x 101.6 cm)



"She's a bit long in the tooth," 1987, copper oxide on torn rag paper
25" x 16 1/2" (63.5 x 42 cm)

We are grateful to Sybao Cheng-Wilson for her assistance with all aspects of this retrospective.

CHING HO CHENG: A RETROSPECTIVE

September 25th – November 15th, 2008

Shepherd Gallery is pleased to present Ching ho Cheng's (1946-1989) first retrospective and our third exhibition of his works. This retrospective features works from his psychedelic period in the late 60s to his gouache shadow pieces, torn abstractions, and alchemical works in the 70s and 80s.

Cheng's gouaches were inspired by the ordinary objects that surrounded him in his Chelsea Hotel studio. Thomas Sokolowski, currently Director of The Andy Warhol Museum, curated a contemporary art exhibit at the Grey Art Gallery that featured Cheng's monumental *Grotto*. Cheng's spirituality struck Sokolowski: "In the observation of the mundane and the seemingly inconsequential...Ching was able to provide some footholds on the long path along which he, and we, all tread. His work is deeply sacred in the mode of natural phenomena and primitive ritual." As Sokolowski has observed, Cheng beautifully captured the essence of even the most banal objects.

In the early 80s, Cheng ripped up a drawing that frustrated him. This gesture was eye-opening for him, and led to a fascinating body of torn work. Sokolowski noted: "Through the destructive act of tearing, he [Cheng] was able to recombine the sundered halves into some remarkable new unity." In addition to the torn works are the rust pieces, inspired by the mystifying caves and grottos Cheng saw on his trip to Turkey. Regarding the rust pieces, Sokolowski remarked that Cheng simulated "the natural [oxidation] process as a kind of latter day alchemist." Cheng recreated the process of oxidation by affixing copper or iron powder to paper and submerging the mixture in vinegar water to create rust on its surface, which resulted in powerful abstractions.

Cheng's work is represented in many public collections, including the Brooklyn Museum, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, the Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse University Art Galleries, and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.

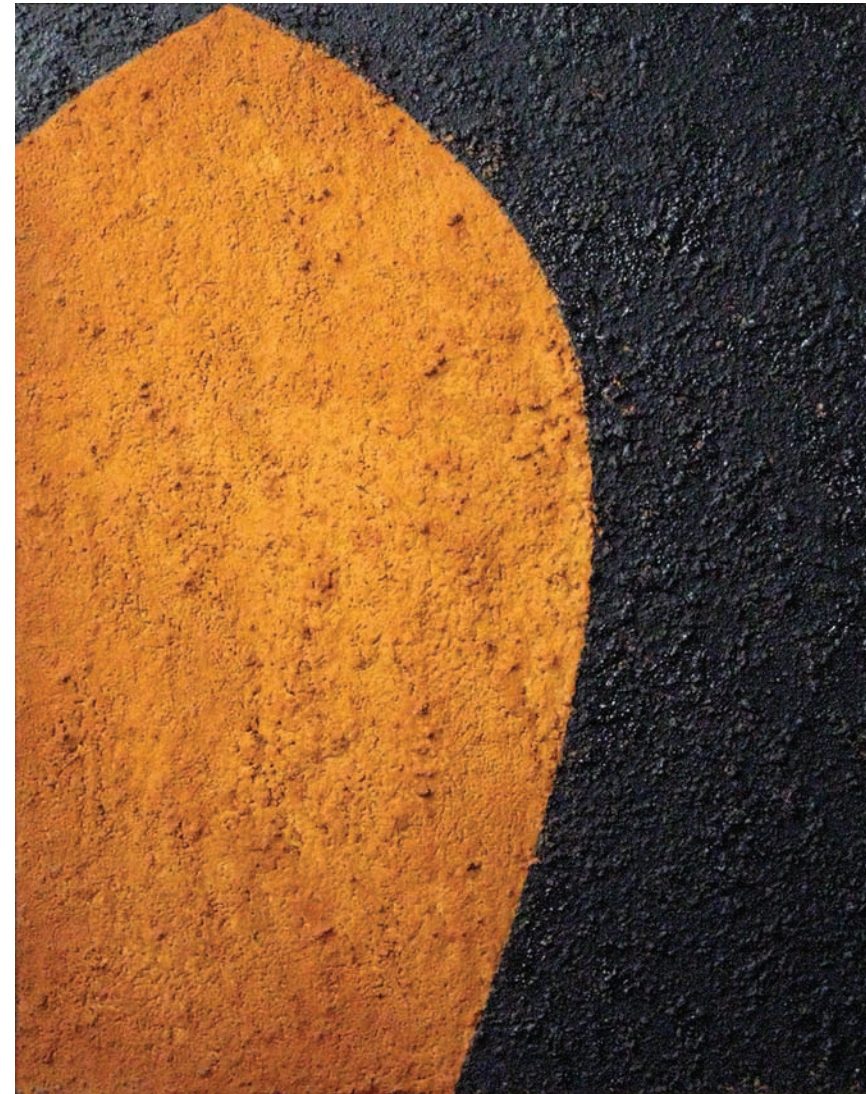
You are cordially invited to attend
a reception for the exhibition at Shepherd & Derom Galleries on

Thursday, September 25th, 6:00 – 8:00 p. m.

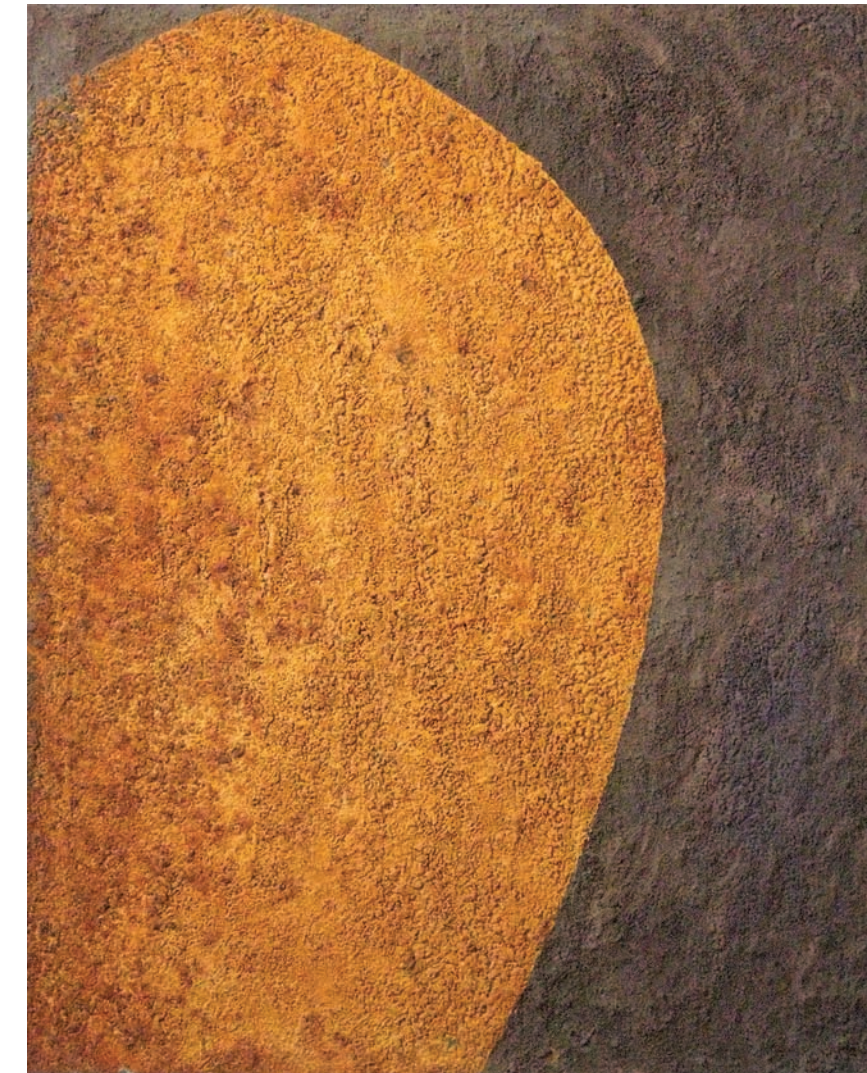
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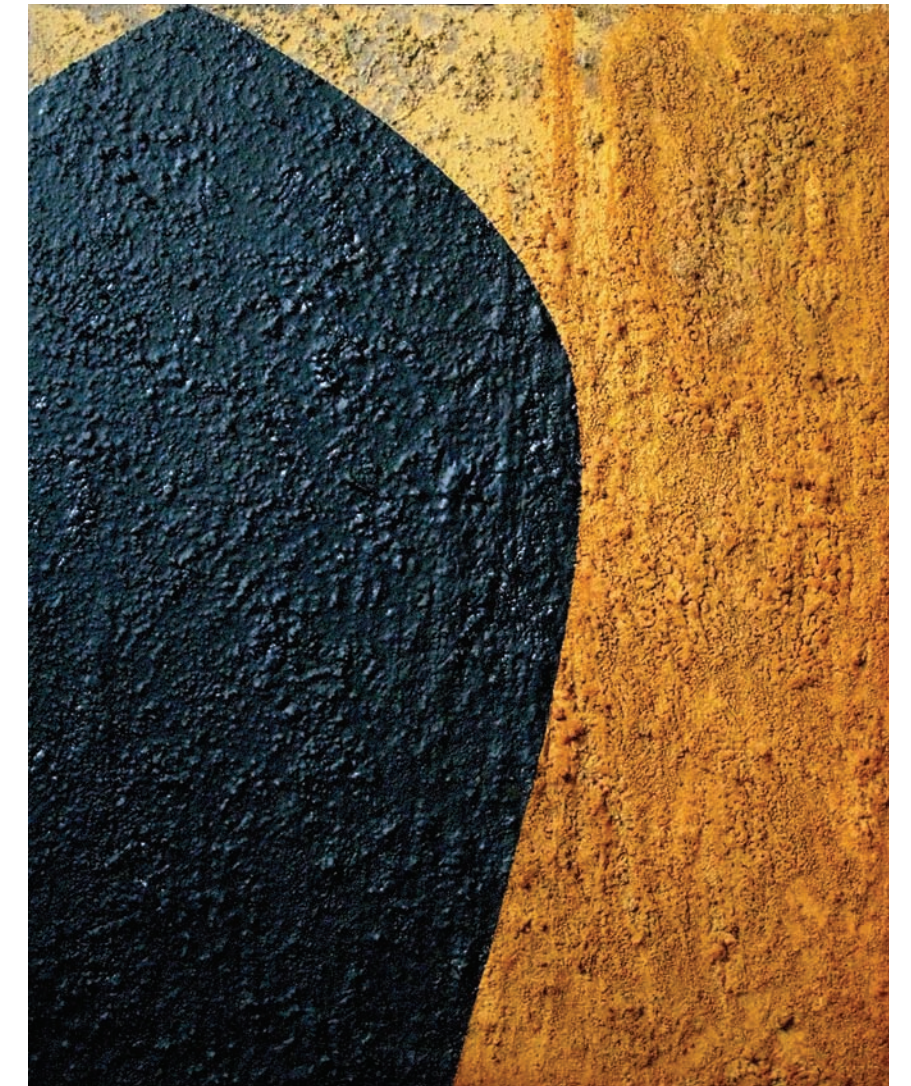
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I



II



III

Untitled, triptych, 1988, iron oxide and acrylic on canvas
Panel I 30" x 24" (76.2 x 61 cm)
Panel II 30" x 26" (76.2 x 66 cm)
Panel III 30" x 24" (76.2 x 61 cm)

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CHING HO CHENG A RETROSPECTIVE