

Ching Ho Cheng

SYBAO CHENG-WILSON WITH SIMON WU

Ching Ho Cheng (1946–1989) was born in Havana, Cuba, the son of Chinese diplomats. In 1951 he moved to New York, eventually studying painting at Cooper Union and making vivid, psychedelic paintings inspired by his study of Taoism, Tibetan art, Hopi and Navajo artifacts, and Hieronymus Bosch. He moved to the Chelsea Hotel in 1976, where he would reside until his death. In the fall of 2021, I had the privilege of working with his sister, Sybao Cheng-Wilson, to put together a selection of his work at the David Zwirner gallery in New York, as part of a project marking the 40th anniversary of the first diagnosed case of HIV/AIDS in the United States. This interview reflects on the process of curating that exhibition, considering all of the archives — physical, emotional, human — in which Ching and his work live on.

Simon Wu: I was hoping today that we could reflect a bit on the process of putting together the show for Ching at David Zwirner. You've been very kind to show me all of the work in periodic installments and also to look through the archival materials that weren't sent to the Smithsonian, of course. We've reflected a lot on whether or not those materials would show up in the show or not, and part of that was because there was such a rich social world that Ching inhabited that felt like it would be interesting to present in relation to his work. It will really be a whole different project to process all that material.

So much of this has been learning about Ching through you, and you're Ching's little sister, but it makes me think about how my brothers would describe me, and how much they probably actually don't know about my life. I wonder how you feel about that. Did you

feel that Ching had another life beyond when you were with him? And did you ever feel that he was protective of you?

Sybao Cheng-Wilson: Absolutely not. I do not have any concerns about that. Ching and I had a very unusual brother-sister relationship, based on what I've learned from his friends. It might be because he was almost nine years older, it might also be the fact that he was like a parent to me growing up. I do sometimes worry that people will actually think that what I project about his work is my own viewpoint, and not Ching's. I've thought a great deal about this. I am very careful to be clear when I insert my own views. Ching was an extremely open person, and he exposed me to everything under the sun at a very young age. He would invite me to loft parties in Soho, and I would often stay with him on weekends. I pretty much would tag along to all his events. I met his friends, some of them were quite wild and some were not, he never shielded me from anything, at least that is how it seemed at the time! But getting back to your initial question, I do feel I knew my brother well. As with anyone, you can't know every single thing about a person.

SW: What was the first party that he took you to?

SCW: Well, I don't know if it was the very first party, but one of the parties that stands out in my mind is Tally Brown's performance at Continental Baths. It was a gay men's bathhouse, and they would have entertainment at midnight every Saturday. Bette Midler started out there. Ching also made a poster for her string of performances that year. They didn't card you or anything, there were men walking around half naked in only towels. I don't remember any other girls there but me. There was a pool and steam room. I was 15 years old, Ching would escort me in,

and I would stay with Tally backstage and meet her hairdresser and pianist, Bill Schneider. Tally's repertoire included songs from the Rolling Stones, David Bowie, and others. The boys loved her show, she always received a standing ovation and gave an encore performance. Afterwards Ching would introduce me to some of his friends, like Holly Woodlawn and Candy Darling, who were Andy Warhol superstars — at the time they called themselves transvestites. I'm always concerned that I'm saying the wrong words, but that was the term we used in the 1970s. You could tell they loved that Ching brought his little sister, they were all over me with affection. I didn't know that they were men dressed as women, because I had no idea. Candy Darling was the Ru Paul of that era. An absolutely stunning blonde woman. Afterwards, Ching said to me, "What did you think?" I said, "Oh, she's so beautiful." And Ching said, "She's a man." I said, "Oh, really? No!" And he said, "Yes. Isn't she beautiful?" Of course, I totally agreed! This is a good example of the places Ching would take me! He wanted me to meet the avant-garde of New York. He loved that they were doing their own thing!

One weekend, Ching told me to meet him at a loft on the Bowery at midnight — everything starts at midnight or after in those days — so I went with my girlfriend Faye, and we climbed up loads of stairs to a fourth-floor loft. When we arrived, people were partying, smoking weed, and drinking to loud music. Then suddenly the door slammed shut, and in those days they had those metal doors in lofts which bolted shut with a long metal bar, and I thought, "Oh, my God, what's happening? We're trapped!" Faye and I were scared, I mean, we were 16, and everybody else was in their 20s or even early 30s. Next all the lights went out. It was literally pitch black. We huddled up close to each other leaning against the wall. Meanwhile, you can smell

the marijuana and incense and everyone is stoned except Faye and me. The lights flicker on and off, on and off. All of a sudden the lights are back on and everybody's naked! Not the guests, but these people who turned out to be actors. They had tall sticks, which they pounded on the floor, *boom boom boom* while dancing. We were freaked! I'm pretty sure it was the Living Theater, a well-known underground theater company. These were Ching's friends. We didn't know what performance art was nor did we ever hear of it, so we had no clue what this was. Ching had already left by this point because he wanted to go to another party, but he didn't tell me this was going to happen. I guess that was the point! As soon as the lights went back, we ran the hell out of there, we feared what was coming next! That's what the Living Theater was, complete shock performance!

SW: So Ching would just take you around to these parties while you were living in New York at the time?

SCW: But only on the weekends. My homework and his painting always came first. Ching made sure of that. He was extremely disciplined, and partying did not take precedence. This is probably something that rubbed off from our Chinese culture. Not every party was wild. Once we went to a New Year's Eve party at a townhouse on the Upper East Side and met Leonard Bernstein. I remember Tally was so excited because Bernstein was her mentor and she had not seen him in years. Another memorable event was the private dinner after David Bowie's performance at Radio City Music Hall. That was really exciting! It was only three tables, and a very intimate gathering with his family and performance crew which actually took place in Radio City Music Hall in their VIP dining room. The famous designer Kansai Yamamoto was there and Pierre La Roche,

the rock star make-up artist. Ching was always full of surprises!

SW: Because he had gone to Cooper Union and had lived in the East Village.

SCW: Yes, exactly, he wanted me to be exposed to a different world than I was living in. I wasn't doing well in high school, it was a rough school. Ching decided that I should apply to the High School of Art and Design on East 57th Street. I needed to submit a portfolio and take an exam to be accepted into the school. Every weekend, I stayed with Ching at his loft on Spring Street, and he would give me drawing lessons. I remember he taught me how to show reflection and dimension on my fruit in my still life drawings using charcoal. I actually got good at it. Long story short, I applied and got in — it changed my whole world!

I think it is apparent that Ching had a major role in my life. We did not have a typical brother-sister relationship, because we were friends too. I would spend weekends with him and Tally. And in the mid 70s, when Ching moved to Amsterdam, I went over to see him and stayed there for three or four weeks when he had a solo exhibition. When Ching was in Paris, I flew over there as well. We did have sister-brother battles like any other siblings, but everyone always said, "I don't know any sister and brother like Ching and Sybao." Sometimes he had friends that I didn't like, and that would be the main contention between us. I was always dedicated to my brother, and he guided me through my life, even in death. I've given a lot of thought over the many years as to how the years have unfolded. I think that Ching was born to paint, and I was born to manage his paintings. I am here to be the steward of his work and of course, mother to my precious daughter, Tia. I think we're all here for a reason, you just have to figure it out!

SW: And when did you start managing his work?

SCW: After he died, it was all very quick. It's kind of interesting to me, because Ching made me so very aware of things in life. For example, "Isn't it interesting that my brother learns he is sick in September, and he dies exactly nine months later?" The nine, to me, is like a period of gestation. I'm thinking "Why did he die nine months later and not ten?" It's all very symbolic for Ching in particular, it coincides with his spiritual beliefs. He used the nine symbol in his Alchemical Works. Nine represents a new cycle, did you know that? When I was 16, he said out of the blue to me one day, "If I ever cannot paint, for any reason, Sybao, I want you to know that I don't want to live anymore." I looked at him and I thought, "Why are you saying that? It's such a dramatic, depressing thing to say! Don't tell me something like that!" But when the time came, it was true. When he couldn't paint anymore, he died. Anyone that was close to Ching can attest to his love and dedication to his work, it was everything to him.

SW: So after his death it was obvious to you that you were going to help manage this artwork?

SCW: Yes and no. I was recently married and moved to LA, and then Ching got sick. I tried to fly back and forth, but I couldn't bear the thought of Ching being alone. When the time came, he decided to leave his paintings to me. I did not understand what that would entail, but it didn't matter. I made a promise to Ching, and at his memorial I stated that I would care for his work. It was an impressive memorial with many prominent people from the artworld. I wanted them to know the work would carry on. It took several years for me to learn how to go about managing his estate, and I am pleased with the progress that I

have made. My heart has been in it from the start, and I keep going. Fortunately, I have had the support and collaboration of Robert Kashey and David Wojciechowski from Shepherd Gallery from the beginning and Bruce Bergmann from BCB Art. Every year that passes, I discover something new in Ching's paintings. Ching speaks to me through his artwork. It's wonderful to discover and a comfort in many ways! There's so much that I wish I had understood when he was alive so that we could talk about it, but the fact is, I wasn't ready. I was too young and immature. But Ching was already there, light years ahead of his time.

SW: I'm thinking of the seal, handprints, and thumbprints, how beautiful ...

SCW: Yes, that is his Chinese seal that you saw on the Kite painting. It was a gift from our aunt in China. Funny she didn't send us separate seals but a brother and sister set which could not be separated because of the artwork inscribed on the ivory. So we shared the set and he tried to use it on several occasions on his paintings but he couldn't get a clean stamp. Eventually he had to abandon the Chinese seal and moved on to the fresh cut onion seal for his work. I think he liked the fact that each onion had unique rings when cut in half. Just like a hand or thumb print is distinctive to each person, which were used in some earlier works.

SW: It's just interesting to hear how you describe his sexuality or his romantic partners. It's very different from how my brothers would describe it, using today's language. My brother would probably say, "My brother is gay, he mostly dated men." Throughout our conversations, I've never heard you say explicitly that he was one way or another. It seems that things were more fluid in that way, or at least that he himself was more fluid.

SCW: Actually, he would never say anything, he would just show up with his person, and I would figure it out. He was involved with Vali Myers for a while, then Tally Brown for five years, and then there was Greg, the wonderful Gregory Millard, and lastly Gert Schiff. In those days, everyone used the word "lover," whether you were gay, straight, or whatever. It is completely "out" now! Ching didn't use labels, because what attracted him was the person. And in those days, if you were bisexual, or you said that you were bisexual, that wasn't good by gay community standards. They didn't like that. They would say you are not actually bisexual, you just don't know that you're gay yet, or you just don't want to say that you are gay.

God, in the 70s "queer" was such a derogatory word to use! So horrible to say to anyone. I did my own focus group after our initial conversation, because I was really curious, so I polled a bunch of my friends. I just wanted a yes or no answer, and I asked people of my age range if they had any kind of gender studies or women's studies courses in college. Everyone said no, never. Except one friend, who told me that he went to a very progressive college in Boulder, Colorado, and they had women's studies. He's 15 years younger than my age group so keep this in mind. I wanted to see if I'm crazy to think that queer is a negative word. I'm thinking, I grew up in a very gay community and have lots of gay friends. I think I'm qualified to speak, I learned that my generation do feel that queer is a derogatory word. We remember the pain it inflicted on our friends so there is no way of getting around those memories.

SW: I agree. I am generally wary, as a person, of putting words from a certain era on top of a different era. I don't think that people would have self-identified as "queer," in the way that people do today. It sounds nicer that it wasn't labelled in that way; it feels more free or open.

SCW: I hope it changes soon! We will see what happens in time and what sticks. Words have different meanings for every generation. And it is quite common for these labels to become dated and out of use.

SW: What about the term "Asian American" or "trans-American"?

SCW: I discovered at a very young age, on my birth certificate, that I was labelled yellow under "race." I remember I was so insulted. I said to my father, "Why does it say that my race is 'yellow?' I'm not yellow!" As the years rolled on, we became Orientals, then we became Chinese-American. And then at some point we have been combined into one category, Asian American. At the time of Ching's death, Asian American was rather non-existent. Ching identified as Chinese-American or just American. I never even heard of trans-American.

SW: How did Ching feel about these terms?

SCW: I don't think Ching gave much thought to these things. We felt American, in those days the school of thought was to assimilate as best as you could to be an American. That included language, food, and culture. We didn't know we looked different — we lived in New York — we had such an eclectic group of people around us, this was simply not an issue. We weren't aware of these things because we didn't have to be. It was a glorious time, there is something to be said of the hippie movement, flower power, and free love of the 60s! Ching was attracted to people for who they were as human beings. He did not have people classified in boxes. Last night, I was talking to Patricia Kelly, who was a friend of my brother. She said she was thinking about how Ching was friends with all types of people, not just artists, but it could be from the housekeeper at the Chelsea

Hotel to friends who were actually royalty and everyone in between. Patricia said, “I don’t know anyone else that was like that!”

SW: It’s rarely couched in those terms today. Now it’s all about labels. It’s also interesting because you’ve shown me these great chains of letters, which show that he was reflecting on some of these things. I’m thinking now of the one where he had been going around to different galleries and submitting his work, and then being made to feel like a joke.

SCW: There was a very prestigious gallery in Soho during the 70s. I shall not mention the name, but any artist of that time knows who it was — they were located on West Broadway and considered one of the top galleries in NY. Ching brought his first works to that gallery, this would be his Psychedelic Series, he was told by the director that his psychedelic works were not fine art, he said that the works would frighten the clients. At the time, I don’t believe Ching felt it had anything to do with race, but I think as time progressed, he realized that there weren’t any male Chinese artists making it. No one was showing Chinese artists. Anyway, it’s so interesting that this top gallery no longer exists but Ching’s psychedelic series survived and are collected in museums and being exhibited at David Zwirner today. The work was ahead of its time and has survived through decades, a true test.

SW: We’ve spoken before about how Ching was one of very few Chinese American, Asian American artists at the time. Was he friends with other Asian American artists that you know of?

SCW: Oh yes. There was one other Chinese American artist, Dui Seid. Dui and Ching were classmates at Cooper Union, and they became good friends. They were the only Chinese or Asian people in their class of 1968

or in the upper classes! Ching and Dui were roommates when they graduated and lived in a giant loft on Canal Street. Dui ended up moving to Paris for ten years and lived at La Ruche, a famous artist quarter. Ching would stay with him when he visited Paris and me too. I am friends with him today. I’ve known him since I was twelve years old.

SW: Did it feel like some of the difficulty he was facing with those galleries was part of his race, or was it firmly about the work?

SCW: Quite frankly, he never spoke of it, but I think in retrospect of course it had to do with race. It just wasn’t happening for Chinese people to exhibit like today. That specific period, 1975 to 1985, there really weren’t any successful contemporary Chinese American artists or painters. The Japanese were doing fine [laughs] but that’s a different story. I think it has to do with the Chinese Exclusion Act, only 106 immigrants were allowed into the country per year at that time. I thought about when Ching arrived in this country, out of 106 people — struggling immigrants — how many Chinese men do you think would choose to go into the arts or would be able to survive as artists at that time? It was a rarity. Ching’s work reflects a perspective of the Chinese American during that era in history, it is noteworthy.

SW: Those letters have been such a joy to read, they’re so interesting. I wonder what role you feel like those letters and other archiving things play in Ching’s practice.

SCW: Thank you, I think those letters are so important because you are able to experience an authentic view of who Ching was and hear his voice. Without them, you really don’t know the artist, you only know of him, that is why I wanted you to read them. Ching kept things that were sacred, that were beautiful,

and that were important to him, everything else got dumped. I knew that if he kept letters from Vali Myers, Tally Brown and others, they were special and therefore should be preserved in the Smithsonian Archives. What was fortuitous is that Dui Seid was cleaning out his loft and found these old letters from Ching. He asked if I wanted them back and the rest is history. I discovered all those little drawings, and the story of the Basel Art Fair debacle through those letters. Apparently, the gallery reneged on their promise to transport the return of the psychedelic paintings to Ching after the fair, therefore leaving Ching and other artists with this burden. It was a disaster for many struggling artists.

SW: Most of those letters are in the Smithsonian?

SCW: Yes. The thing about Ching’s death is that it was really a rude awakening that we are not here forever. I didn’t want to take any chances, something could happen to me and things would get lost. Donating Ching’s letters and other artifacts to the Smithsonian Archives seemed like the right thing to do. Researchers could access them and they are preserved. The hotel has had too many mishaps, just this month we had two fire alarms, and multiple water leaks from our kitchen ceiling.

SW: But I mean, that’s another amazing thing, that the Chelsea Hotel is such a famous landmark now, and that he lived in the apartment between this and the floor below.

SCW: The hotel was always famous, even during those indigent times because we have a history of famous creative people that have lived here at one time or passed through — it has a special aura that artists love. I was surprised that in Europe, artists

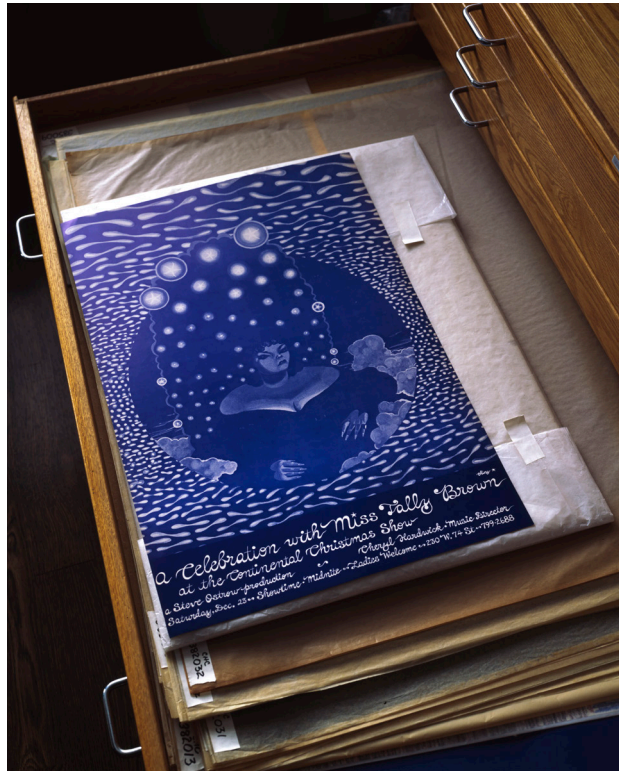
are still enamoured with the Chelsea Hotel. So many of them still come to interview or film us for their projects. There is a mystique here that will not die. Ching lived in several apartments in the hotel from the 70s until his death. I remember he had an apartment on the 6th floor that Arthur Miller lived in during his separation from Marilyn Monroe. You can see Ching in this particular apartment in the film, Tally Brown, New York, by Rosa Von Praunheim. Ching has a scene in his suite with Tally.

SW: When did you move to the Chelsea Hotel?

SCW: I moved here officially in 1988 but I’ve been visiting since the mid 70s when Ching first moved here. When he became ill, I moved in and never left. This was Ching’s last apartment, and when he started to make some money, he rented an additional studio on the 10th floor. Stanley Bard, the manager, would be very flexible about renting studios. If he was working on a large piece, he could rent a larger studio on a month-to-month basis. It was a wonderful arrangement for an artist.

SW: It’s kind of amazing that, thanks to whatever turn of events, this is where he lived and worked, now this is where all the work is stored, and now you’re living in it.

SCW: Yes, so true, but this place has had several incarnations. At one time the living room was Ching’s art studio, he covered the walls in plastic to protect it from paint splatter. That was the first incarnation. Later when Ching had his separate studio, he turned the living room into a garden. When our daughter Tia was a kid, the space became a playroom with wall to wall toys. Now we have arrived at a point where we have a conventional living room and have expanded



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: This stone eye was a 'study' for several paintings that are representative of the four seasons.

I recently learned that these seals belonged to my grandfather, who gave it to my aunt. The brother/sister seals are made of ivory and are cased in ox horn.

This is the outside view of the metal box; Ching painted the jeweled butterfly. As you may note, pet names are written on the top and bottom of the box.

This is Ching's poster for Tally Brown's Continental Bath House Performance of 1972. As depicted, her wig would light up as her Christmas finale."

SYBAO CHENG-WILSON
All photos by Matthew Leifheit

to the apartment next door where we have a separate space for the artwork. Yea!

SW: And the light works are of, as you've described, the angle of the sunlight through these exact windows?

SCW: Since we face south, the sunlight would have reflected on this wall, and then it would move around the room to the floor where the garden existed. It also would change colour depending on the sky colour. It is very beautiful to watch the shadow move as the sunsets during the four seasons in this apartment.

SW: The only other main thing that I wanted to ask about is this little book that he had made, and to talk about Ching's relation to race. He wrote the introduction in that book. Can you speak more about that?

SCW: The book you are referring to, is *Geechies*. Ching was the publisher of this book and wrote the preface in addition to the drawings and paintings he created. They are of the Louisiana bayou where Greg's poems take place. Gregory Millard was Ching's partner. I will add that he was Black, for readers. He died of AIDS at the young age of 37. Greg was a wonderful and talented person. We found it astounding and impressive that he left Harvard in his last semester, and his job as Deputy Commissioner of Cultural Affairs of New York City, so he could write. He was studying law, and he knew once he received his law degree he would never become a writer. It was a tragedy that he died soon after he resigned and was beginning his dream. As far as race, Ching had close friends from all around the world, I think that says it all. He didn't speak about it per say, he was not an activist, he was too busy painting!

SW: Do the original of these drawings exist anywhere?

SCW: Oh, yes, I still have some original drawings that are not sold yet. There are some gouache paintings as well from *Geechies*. Ching also made a painting of Greg's pink tiled shower, it's titled *Waterfall*, Chelsea Hotel, New York (1978) you can see it on the Cleveland Museum of Art website.

SW: Did you save any of Ching's other things, like clothing?

SCW: I've saved some things, for sure. I have Ching's t-shirt with a little paint splatter on it. I kept this beautiful stone that use to be white, he painted an eye on it, but the stone darkened with age. I thought about having it cleaned, but maybe the painted eye would be washed away. I think I've shown it to you.

SW: Yeah, you have.

SCW: Also I have a leather belt he made me out of snakeskin with his hand carved bone and a beautiful hat that he gave me for my 15th birthday. Actually, now that I think about it, I do have a lot of things that I kept, Ching was a great gift-giver!

SW: Those are interesting, because this issue of *PUBLIC* is about this concept of queer archives, which is, on one hand, about archives that are from gay or queer people, but also about archives that are in themselves queer, or eccentric, and how the word archive makes something like paper come to mind ...

SCW: I do have this painting to show you of the *Tattooed Man*. I'll bring it out. This belonged to Tally Brown — Ching gave her this painting on *Bastille Day*. As you can see, he would inscribe it on the outer cover of the

portfolio in his beautiful calligraphy. I also want to tell you about this beautiful box Ching made. He hand-painted this lovely round box with one of his astral babies on the cover. When you opened it, it was an experience because it was beautiful on the outside, and first thing, you would smell the pot pourri, then you had the fun of discovering the good luck charms in the pot pourri!

SW: Do you have a picture of this one? It's a very pretty picture. Part of what I'm talking about with queer archives are things that are on paper, but also things that aren't, like handprints or t-shirts or stones — those things that are not often thought of as an archive. This whole apartment is basically an archive.

SCW: I have this sweet envelope which Ching made, he decorated the envelope with these two puppy paws prints and inscribed it "Mandrake's prints." Ching had a friend Constance Abernathy who was a dog breeder. Since I know he traded for Mandrake, I'm not quite sure why the inscription reads "On the occasion of her birthday — Love, Ching. 1970." Before Constance died of lung cancer, she returned her collection of Ching paintings to me. Inside the envelope was her portrait. This is the drawing I am showing you. Ching always made studies before he painted the final piece. I sold her portrait to a collector in China.

I also have a beautiful Easter egg that Ching made with Tally's portrait on it. He used a Sharpie and it has held up quite well. By now you must have gathered that Tally was family to us. When she died, I was one of her heirs, that is why I have so many gifts that Ching gave her. Including his letters to her. Her archives are at the Andy Warhol Museum, minus Ching's letters, of course.

Sybao Cheng-Wilson is a native New Yorker currently residing at the Chelsea Hotel with her husband, actor/writer William W. Wilson III, and daughter. She studied at the Mayer School of Fashion Design where her mother was a student. Together they created a hand embroidered clothing line which was sold nationally at stores

such as Bergdorf Goodman, Saks Fifth Avenue and Harrod's of London. Her designs have been featured in *New York Magazine's Best Bests and Soho News*. Sybao modeled for fashion icon Antonio Lopez and photographer Bill Cunningham during the mid 1970s. She has been an avid student of

ballet since her 20s and has discovered it to be a unique form of meditation. As of 1989, Sybao has dedicated herself extensively to the stewardship and curatorial duties as director of her brother's estate where she recently expanded his reach internationally and into film.

Simon Wu is an American writer, curator, and graphic designer based in New York. He was named the 2018 Van Lier Fellow in Visual Arts Curation by the Asian American Arts Alliance. Wu

currently serves as a Public Programs Fellow at the Brooklyn Museum of Art and as Program Coordinator for the Racial Imaginary Institute. In 2021 he curated a Ching Ho Cheng

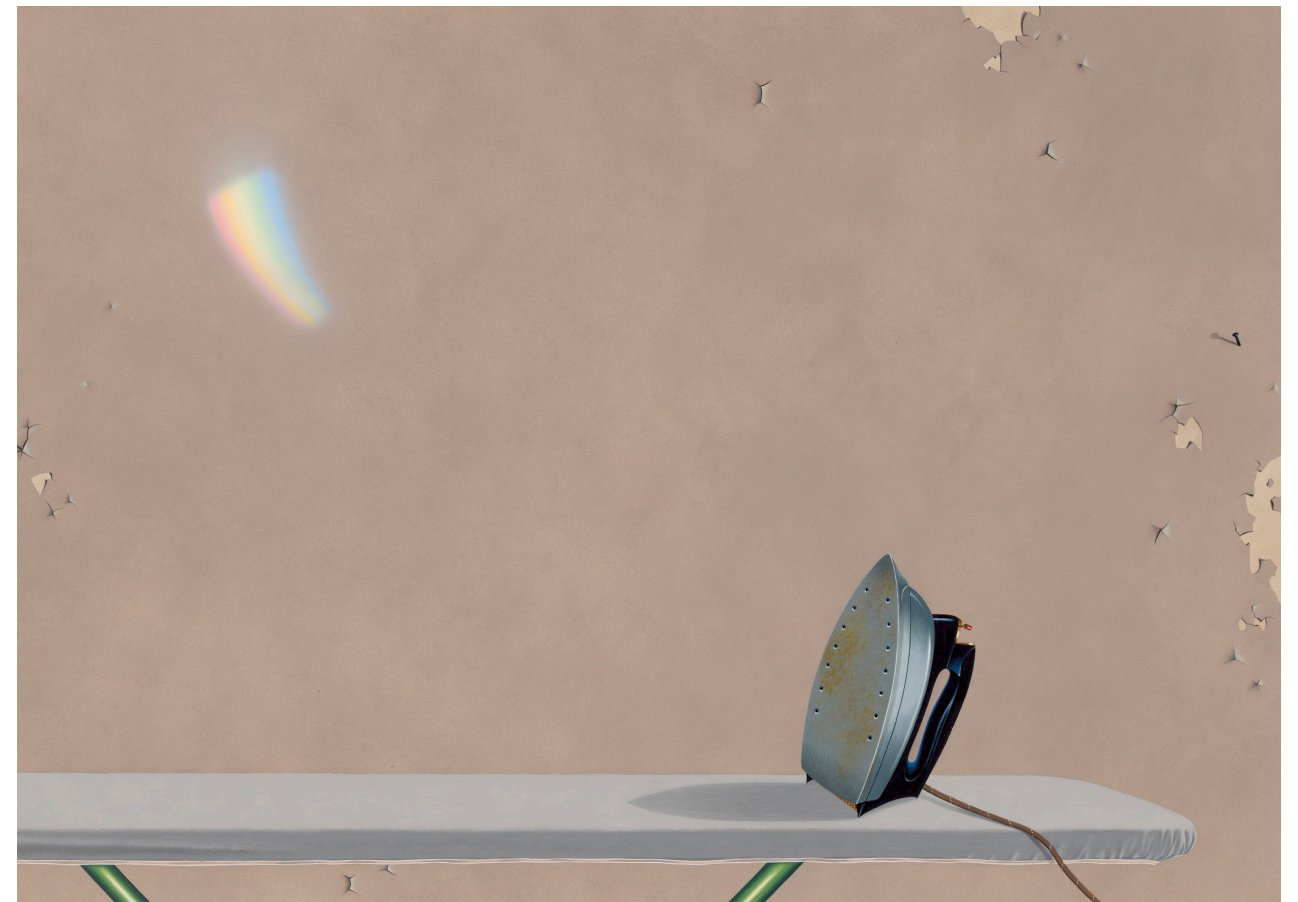
exhibition as part of a series of the *More Life* exhibitions at David Zwirner, New York. He was also awarded an Arts Writer grant from the Andy Warhol Foundation in 2021.







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Untitled (1980). © 2021 Estate of Ching Ho Cheng / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.