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Phillip Chen interview

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Interviewer: Christina Morris  
Artist: Phillip Chen  
In-person interview conducted in Chicago, IL.  
Date: April 20th, 2013 13:47 – 14:57 CST

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 203: Asian American Arts & Culture during Spring Quarter 2013 as part of the Asian American Art Oral History research project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design/Director Asian American Studies.

Artist Bio:  
Phillip Chen received the B.F.A. degree from University of Illinois at Chicago and the M.F.A. degree from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. His prints have been exhibited in over one hundred and fifty locations nationally and internationally and are held by public collections that include The Brooklyn Museum, The New York Public Library, The Carnegie Institute Museum of Art, The Art Institute of Chicago, The San Francisco Museum of Fine Arts, and The Hunterian Museum, Glasgow, Scotland. He has traveled extensively as a visiting artist and has served as an evaluator for the National Endowment for the Arts, College Art Association, and The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. His creative activities have been supported by The Louis B. Comfort Tiffany Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, Illinois Arts Council, and Iowa Arts Council.

Phillip Chen’s recent exhibitions include a solo presentation at Three Shadows Photography Art Center, Beijing, and a two-person exhibition at A&D Gallery, Columbia College, Chicago, IL. Group exhibitions include: Bemis Center for the Arts, Omaha, NE; Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL; National Academy Museum of Art, New York, NY; International Print Center, New York, NY; Kentler International Drawing Space, Brooklyn, NY; and Edinburgh Printmakers, Edinburgh, Scotland.

His upcoming solo exhibition will be held at Asian/Pacific/American Institute, New York University, New York, NY.

Phillip Chen is Professor of Drawing and Printmaking at Drake University.

Artist Statement:  
Phillip Chen’s ongoing series of prints, Origins and Destinations, explores the multiplicity of vision and the permeability of categories. The series is based upon customary definitions of various forms of visual representation, such as “temporally anterior;” a “verification” of things “having been there” (documentary photography) and “projective, theoretical, and provisional” (diagrammatic drawing). Through graphic overlappings and adjacencies, Phillip Chen’s uses of multiple visual languages explicate and redress cultural-historical events and conflate transnational relationships with interpersonal experience.

- bio and statement courtesy of the artist
Interviewer’s note to give the context of the interview: Phillip Chen suggested we meet at a Chinese restaurant in Chicago called Orange Garden located at 1942 W. Irving Park Rd. The Orange Garden was a restaurant owned by his uncle in the 1920’s, and a place where his father worked in the 1930’s. This interview was conducted in person at the Orange Garden on April 20th 2013.

Interview Transcript:

CHRISTINA MORRIS: Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? Like a mini biography; birth date, where you grew up, where you went to school etc.

PHILLIP CHEN: I was born in Chicago, on the north side. I have always been a Northsider. I grew up in what’s now called Old Irving Park - immediately west of here [Orange Garden Restaurant]. One of the reasons I wanted to meet here is because it has a lot to do with my family history. My dad worked here when he first came to the country. My uncle owned this place. I went to public schools; I went to Lane Tech High School . . . I didn’t study art. I took a technical program. I took a lot of math and science at Lane, and then when it came time to go to college, I didn’t follow through. I declared an art major and surprised everyone! I was supposed to go into business. In my family all of the success stories were about those who went into business. I think my parents had some idea that I was going to be a business major, get an MBA and make lots of money, you know -- typical Chinese family. But I chose to do something else. They were worried but what could they do?
PC: I went to the University of Illinois in Chicago, and then the Art Institute of Chicago for grad school. After undergraduate school I worked in a magazine publishing company and got really fed up with that quickly. And that’s when I went to grad school. I thought I’d never go back to school again, and then I worked full time at a job that I loathed.

I studied printmaking at the Art Institute. I think my first teaching jobs were really technical assistanceships at UIC, and then part time teaching drawing at Columbia College and part time printmaking work at UIC. I did that for quite a while. My goal was never to get a full time job…I just wanted to make art and have a lot of time to do things. But when a job at Northwestern University became available fulltime, I couldn’t think of an excuse not to apply. That would’ve been in 1985, and then from there, I worked at the Art Institute. I took a position at Drake University, which I’ve been at since ’95.

CM: Were you teaching the same thing at those three schools?

PC: I did drawing and printmaking, but what ever they need me to do.

CM: How did you discover that you wanted to be an artist? Was there someone in your life that exposed you to making art?

PC: My dad had a restaurant at 4027 West Irving, a Chinese restaurant. I grew up there. You know you’d go to these Chinese restaurants and you’d see little kids sitting in the back doing their homework, shelling peapods and things like that. That was me, everyday. I grew up at the restaurant, and in my down time I would always draw. I was always drawing. So like, with scraps of paper and pencil, I’d be copying things like cartoon strips. So there was always that inclination to make pictures. It’s true that in grade school people identified me as somebody that made art. You know how that happens: informally you get known for being somebody that likes to draw and is good at it, and so you’re the go-to person for projects, bulletin boards, this and that. There were also, in those days, annual scholastic art exhibitions. There used to be a department store in Chicago called Wieboldt’s. Wieboldt’s would hold a massive scholastic competition centered around visual art. It was a big deal to try to get into the scholastic art exhibition downtown. I think those were my first formal exhibitions in grade school. I would always submit and get in, and win prizes, recognition, and newspaper articles. Imagine you’re like 10 or 11 and you pick up the Tribune and there’s an article on your for being an artist. I liked that. I liked the distinction; it started very early in grade school.

CM: But you still didn’t see yourself as being an artist in the future?

PC: I probably knew more what I didn’t want to do, like a lot of kids. I was supposed to go on a business track. I knew I couldn’t do that, I knew it. Well, you have the aptitude to do it, but you’d get sick and hang yourself or something like that. I knew that it wouldn’t be a fulfilling existence. You get enjoyment from doing the things you do well, and in my case, I got recognition for what I did at a very early age. And that sweet approval is hard to ignore...you tend to go where the success is. So when it came time to seriously think
about what to major in school or what might happen professionally, it was an obvious
direction to go in based on my previous successes. That’s what really engaged me; that’s
what I did willingly. When I was young I would spend great lengths of time working on
major art projects for myself that had nothing to do with school.

CM: How did your family react when you decided not to do business?

PC: With displeasure, of course. They didn’t think it was a good idea. They said I would
starve to death. They said it not even as you might starve to death, that you will starve to
death. This was all stated in Chinese because we didn’t speak English in the household. I
didn’t speak English when I went to school. I remember being totally perplexed in
kindergarten; they had to get my older sister to translate. But I learned very quickly. You
know . . . television, being in school. There was a funny incident when I was in
kindergarten. I couldn’t understand what was going on. My teacher was asking me
something, and I didn’t understand her question, so they went to get my sister who is four
years older. When they brought her into class to translate the question, my sister and I
started laughing when we realized what the issue was. The teacher wanted to know, since
it was lunchtime, whether or not it was required for me to sit on the floor or eat with my
legs crossed.

PC: There was a woman in grade school that was very influential. She was a librarian
and she taught singing. She took it upon herself to encourage me in art. She’d bring me
things from home: art materials, interesting objects, books, you know . . . cultural
material that was lying around her house. Some of it was old, some of them were antiques
– she knew I liked history and stuff. It was something she did on her own, and that really
did make a difference. You’re right, there’s usually somebody or a number of people that
make that kind of difference.

CM: Can you identify one artist (either famous or not well known) who you admired, or
that has influenced you to make artwork?

PC: He’s still alive, and in fact, just yesterday at an opening I ran into his wife. But the
person I’m speaking of is called Roland Ginzel. Roland Ginzel was an abstract painter in
Chicago who was my first studio art teacher at UIC. We’ve remained close ever since.
He’s 93 or 94 and living in Massachusetts. I would say of all the many people I’ve
encountered over the decades in art, Roland Ginzel is probably the most influential. It’s
not about art; it’s not about influencing my particular way of doing things. It’s not about
the product. It’s more about his relationship to making things that I always thought was
distinctive. For one thing, he was the most technically informed. There were a lot of
people that would teach printmaking in those days that didn’t know the process – that
openly stated that they didn’t want to teach it. Imagine taking classes with people that are
resentful about the fact that they have to teach it, and that they don’t know what they’re
doing. And they’re proud of the fact that they don’t know what they’re doing. But Roland
was different; he actually did know his craft and his medium. He was active as an
exhibiting artist. He invited me to his studio . . . we would meet on the weekends and
work together on his invitation. He would even buy my art and give me cash for my work,
which I do today. I never forgot that. I sometimes will buy work from students that I know need money. That comes directly from Roland Ginzel. I would go to his exhibitions.

One of the reasons why I think it’s so important to be an exhibiting artist if you’re teaching is because my own response as an undergrad to people that would talk but didn’t show; I wanted to stay away from them. I gravitated to the people who were professionally engaged, were productive in their studios and were exhibiting. And that was Roland. But most importantly, the thing about Roland that was influential was he wanted art to be part of his life. He didn’t want to make art for the sake of making saleable products. He needed art to be part of a mix of activities that were meaningful to him. In that way he was kind of ahead of his time. It’s kind of like a Fluxus movement before Fluxus. He didn’t want art if it was separated from life. He didn’t say that, but by his behavior and how he verbally expressed himself, and by his examples, I implicitly understood that, and I liked it. We were surrounded by people in school that were careerists. They were looking at the magazines and emulating and trying to gain notoriety or sales by one strategy or another. Roland was entirely different from that. One teacher would look at one of my works and say to me something like, “Well, if you want anybody to pay attention to your work, you gotta make it bigger.” Roland would never say anything like that. Roland would say no, you draw what you know… visualize from a lived experience. That’s the way Roland was most influential. He always had a sense of humor about making art, and enjoyment was always something he would talk about in formal artist statements. Roland was my touchstone. Our work doesn’t look anything alike, but we share an orientation to making things.

CM: So what are you currently working on?

PC: My next show is going to be at NYU. I’m doing a solo show at New York University for the Asian Institute. I’ll be focusing on showing the works that are about my family and Chinese American history.

CM: What are the different types of mediums you’ve made art with over the years?

PC: It’s a range. Even when I painted, I would make things to paint from. So I have boxes full of three-dimensional objects that I’ve made to assist in the making of two-dimensional works. So there is working in three dimensions even though I don’t make those things to show. The experience with three-dimensional object making is critical. Its always has been for painting for drawing, printmaking. So basically everything I show has been flat art. But it’s informed by a range of activities – photography, writing, reading, making models. My show at NYU is going to feature objects as well as my prints. Some of the things that I’ve drawn or photographed will be exhibited along with my prints.

CM: Can you describe the methods in which your relief etchings and lithographs were made?
PC: The relief etchings are the basis of the show in New York, and they include photographs as well as hand drawings. That’s really the most important thing to say about them; those prints are based on interrelationships between photography and hand drawing. They’re about different visual languages, and they utilize certain conceptions that we have in conventional thinking about what photography is and what drawing is. The prints are based on those preconceptions but also are meant to make somebody reconsider those definitions. We all know that photography isn’t necessarily the truth and we’ve had experiences where a map could be more compelling than a landscape. In my relief etchings I’m using different ways of drawing or making imagery to stretch the possibilities of visual language by making categories permeable – sometimes they’re inverted. And that seems like a logical thing to do, actually, when your work has so much to do with cultural intersections or identity formation. A lot of my ideas come from reading. One of the reasons I love printmaking is because the history of printmaking is about a strong relationship between image and text. I’m very committed to printmaking even though it doesn’t make you rich and famous. When I was in undergraduate school, professors that resented teaching printmaking, but were assigned to do it, would be punishing. They would just say to me, “Name me a single artist that’s famous for making prints.” Meaning, you fool, why are you so interested in this process? You’re never going to get rich and famous. And so their advice was always very off the mark for me. It would always be things like strategies to compensate for inadequacy. Like make it more colorful, put in some orange, when in doubt use orange, when in doubt use a diagonal, make it bigger. While Roland understood that what’s called the collective unconscious has a lot to do with the history of print and how influential its been. He would talk about how knowledge for centuries was disseminated through print media. Imagine a world without printmaking? Those kinds of things were exciting.

PC: It really wasn’t until much later that people started to point out to me that there was a strong tradition of print making in the Far East, in China, Japan and Korea. I don’t think that was a factor in my printmaking. It had nothing to do with my sense of heritage. Why do people choose the media they choose to invest in? Those are important issues you know. I know that when I teach printmaking a third of the class will never want to come back, they’ll never want to step foot in that studio again. And then I know that the majority of them will. It’s not just about how it’s taught, its about what the medium is, in terms of a range of activities: a certain tempo, moving, a way of thinking and behaving. Some people are upset with printmaking because there are always these forced delays. You have to wait for something to dry, you have to stop and sharpen your tool or you have to prepare an etch. That frustrates some people, but I usually benefit from it. You know, you work really hard, you break a sweat, you labor, and then you step back and you think about what you’ve done. It’s this relationship between objectification and conceptualization. It’s laborious and it’s intellectual. It suits my body clock or my rhythm very well. To take action and to pause or rest and contemplate. To work really hard, think. It suits my way of being. You know people believe in things like a body clock or circadian rhythm – who am I to discourage that? Maybe printmaking fits me chemically or physiologically. It’s not an issue of my heritage or history of China, my being so invested in printmaking.
**PC:** That’s the thing . . . when you’re an artist and you come from Chinese heritage, and you live in the city of Chicago and make art, people are always inclined to try to define what you do through your heritage. They look for ways for it to be Chinese. I used to be more resistant to that than I am today. For instance the show at the NYU is going to be at the Asian Institute. Twenty years ago I might have hesitated to do it because I might have reflexively felt that I needed to define myself as an artist and not as an Asian artist. But that was a very limited way of thinking; it was very idealistic.

My very good friend is Martin Puryear, an African American sculptor. We do talk about these things together. There was a time when he was very resistant to doing African American art shows. I’ve heard people say, “Oh Martin Puryear, he’s done tons of African American art shows!” but he hasn’t. He’s done maybe three. In fact, as famous as he is I’ve met people that didn’t realize he was black because they know his reputation and they know his name, they know his art, but they didn’t realize he was black. That’s the kind of professional status somebody has when they don’t do a ton of African American shows. Some people’s art is totally based on being African American, like Fred Wilson. Here’s the thing, Martin said he will do a show about African American art and artists if there’s a concept to the show that’s more than race. There’s got to be a concept beyond color, then he’ll do it. And so I feel the same. I think I’ve done one Asian American art show in my life, and it was at DePaul University. One of my heroes was Ray Yoshida. I saw his work when I was in high school . . . never thought we’d be friends and colleagues. When I saw that Ray was slated to be in that show, I thought, if it’s good enough for Ray its good enough for me. It was actually that show that consolidated our relationship. We’d always be friendly and everything but it wasn’t until we showed together at DePaul that we became better friends.

**PC:** The underlying premise of this show in New York is that a lot of Asian Americans, knowingly or not, are still living under the influences of the legacy of Chinese exclusion from the 19th century. So the curator talks about the extension of Chinese exclusion. In the same way that you can say that black on black violence on the West and South Side of Chicago is an extension of slavery, some of the realities for Chinese Americans are an extension of the exclusion acts. I’ve never heard that stated so explicitly before, but when the curator said that I thought it was plausible, and that’s why I wanted to get involved in the show. I want to investigate further the validity of this premise; I want to see if I can recognize it in myself. I already do actually.

**CM:** Now your collection of relief etchings is called Origins and Destinations?

**PC:** That series has been named different things at different times. When I did a show of these in Brooklyn some years ago they weren’t called *Origins and Destinations*, they were called *What We Are Named For*. I wanted to bring forward a relationship between word and image. The ways in which we are seen for who we are, how did that happen and what is that process, has a lot to do with verbal and textual communication. What I said before about the relationship in printmaking between word and image, I wanted to bring that forward in that show in Brooklyn, at the Kentler International Drawing Space. But then when I did a solo show in Beijing, a lot got changed in the work conceptually so
that how I see the relationship between word and image or visual languages really wasn’t as important to me as addressing ideas of how artwork is made meaningful. The simple version is that the meaning or the integrity of an image is totally at the hands of a creator. We know now theoretically that the meaning or integrity of an image is as much or perhaps more in the hands of the perceiver than the originator. So I named that show *Origins and Destinations*. It fit the way that I made the images because a lot of people take photography as a so-called original, a proof of something having been there. But the language of black and white photography is still seen through the lens of straight or documentary photography. But we know that we can digitize images to look veracious when they’re not. But in these etchings I’m playing with the proposed factuality of photographic images. And the drawings are conventionally thought of as being very theoretical or imaginary, something less substantial than the photographed thing. Or even less substantial than the photo itself. So the words origins and destinations actually fit that way of working very well, the seeming originality of the image in photographic form versus these floating haunting diagrammatic images that kind of assemble and disassemble and reassemble. It’s kind of ghostly. It’s almost the platonic idea of images coming out of things; things aren’t what they appear to be. There’s more to things, more than what we see. I don’t want work just to look back; I don’t want work to be anterior, like how photography is a documentation of something that had been there. I want it to be projective to other horizons. That’s where the drawing comes in; it isn’t literally looking back. It would really be depressing to just make work that would be about the past. So the Destinations part of the title is so important, because it goes elsewhere.

**PC:** I think the greatest compliment I’ve ever gotten for art was when somebody said to me, “I have one of your prints on my wall, I look at it regularly. I’ve had it for years and I never stop looking at it. I keep looking at it.” I thought what greater compliment could you get than that your work sustains that kind of engagement over a long period of time. It’s like a living thing. See this is really different than saying I sold a print for 12,000 bucks. I’m not going to define success that way. That’s the thing I learned from Roland.

**CM:** Do you ever address Asian or Asian American identity, themes or histories in your artwork? Please give a specific example.

**PC:** I do. My works take into consideration other peoples too – Native Americans, African Americans. They’re amongst the works that deal with cultural intersections, the history of race, the formulation of race concepts, and so forth. I’ve probably done more work about other peoples than I have about Chinese Americans per say. But an important part of that body of work concerns Chinese Americans. But particularly from the standpoint of my own family history, I’ve done a print about my great grandfather who was a gold miner in California, I’ve done a print about my favorite uncle, I’ve done a print about another uncle that was friends with Cab Callaway. My uncle owned a restaurant in Indiana called the Oriental Garden, and it was the only restaurant in that town that would serve African Americans. Cab Callaway and his band would eat at my uncle’s restaurant. So I’ve done a print about that uncle who was a really interesting man. I’ve done images about my father, but mostly family history has led me to making images about Chinese American history. And then there are other images about African
Americans in the antebellum period, and so forth. I am interested in race relations and what is commonly called socio-political concerns. But it comes and goes…it’s not a consistent thing. You know how that is, you can get on a wave and you go with it, and then you get off. Right now I’m off of it, right now I’m on to something else in terms of an emphasis, a concept that I’m emphasizing. Right now I’m doing a series of work about inexplicable events that I’ve perceived that I can’t understand. I’m drawing about them specifically; I’m looking at them and trying to figure things out…basically things that are called hauntings or psychic events. That has nothing to do with family history or Chinese American themes.

CM: Are these events that have happened to you personally?

PC: They have to be; my image making depends upon personal experience. Everything I draw in the relief prints I handle. Everything has to be handled, including the many things you see photographed in the prints. I just showed one of them at the International Print Center in New York and they featured it on their web page. It’s about something that happened at my dining room table last fall that was very strange. I’m just figuring things out. If you can think it you can draw it, and so I use drawing and printmaking to help myself understand things better. I have a series of three of them now. I have not shown them as a series and I’m not sure I will show them as a series. I showed the one in New York isolated. Kind of testing the waters, because that kind of stuff can be viewed very skeptically. That’s the kind of stuff that makes people think that you’re either out of your mind or that you’re trying some kind of strategic manipulation. And I’m not out of my mind, and I think I’ve tried enough to say that my relationship to making art isn’t about sensationalism or gaining huge amounts of monetary gain or any other kind of profit. My profit is making things and contributing to a dialogue, furthering understanding for myself and for other people, for whoever cares to look. And if they don’t want to look that’s fine too.

CM: Do you think your print was received well out there?

PC: It was almost frightening how well it was received. It was overwhelmingly successful. That’s why they advertised the whole show using my image. I think it was a sensational image; it caught people’s fancy because the event that I was describing was so extraordinary. But I want it to be taken seriously. I don’t want it to be taken as a delight or as a thrill. I don’t want it to be a cheap thrill. I’m worried that it was taken as a cheap thrill. We all know what to do to make money…we all know what to do to have a high impact. We’re skillful enough to do it and we can do it. Like there was this Chinese chef on T.V. years ago that spoke perfectly fluent English with out dialect, but he would always bear his big teeth and speak in pigeon English to cash in. He played the fool. We all know what it takes to profit, but that wasn’t my intention with this print or this series. But when I kind of tested the waters by sending it to New York and it got such a phenomenal response, my first interpretation of that is that it’s taken as a kind of entertainment, like all of these ghost shows on cable T.V., Ghost Adventures, Hunters, all these things about the psychic cultish world. I don’t want to become cultish. I have to
step back and think about this whole series. I might just stop it, or I might just do it for myself.

CM: If so, was identifying as Asian/Asian American something that was also important to you personally? Please explain.

PC: No, no it wasn’t. I grew up in an all white neighborhood; we were the first Chinese family on the Northwest side in my neighborhood. I didn’t attempt to identify myself because that’s the way we were identified. The Chens were well known; we were all under the tyranny of being the model minority. We were the A+ students, we presented ourselves well publicly. With all of that pressure, we were the Asian family. I never attempted to cultivate that. The Asian American heritage is something that you acquire over time. When you’re a kid you’ll do anything you can to blend in. I distinctly remember a time when I would be embarrassed… I was in grade school, very young. I would be embarrassed when my parents would speak Chinese to me publicly because I didn’t want to be separated from my peers. Let’s say I was painfully aware of my differences. So when you’re a certain age you don’t find any distinction in it, you don’t find any pleasure or esteem in being distinctly different. Of course when you get older and your little nervous system matures, and you get a better sense of yourself, you start wanting to be distinct. And as you get older you start valuing those cultural qualities more. I rent movies from Hong Kong; I still listen to Cantonese because I miss it so much.

PC: You know when you’re cross cultural, when you’re fractured that way and you have so many capabilities that are dispersed, part of trying to figure things out is looking at your history. I said to a Chinese man recently, the older that I get the more interested I get in speaking Chinese again, my first language. There’s kind of this stereotype of going back to your mother tongue, but I think it’s more than that. You’re also at a time in your life when you’re trying to figure things out, like how do you fit. How do you not fit? Why have you behaved this way, what constitutes your orientation, why did you do this in your marriage? Why did you do this in raising your kids? Or why can you and why can’t you? And that’s all part of the extension of the history of the Chinese in America. My family was the gold miners and the restaurateurs and the laundry men and the laborers. They worked themselves to death and they were joyless people. It was harsh, it was really harsh. I inherited a real harsh heritage. It’s not like educated people coming here from Taiwan or Hong Kong today. I’m directly descended from a coolie. My great godfather was an indentured gold miner to a company in California, and he was forced to mine naked so that he couldn’t steal the gold. He was contracted, not exactly a slave, but an indentured laborer. The whole history of trying to survive by keeping your head down and doing women’s work, the cooking and the cleaning . . . don’t rock the boat. Don’t do anything to get yourself killed. You develop these abilities; you learn all these things just to try to not get hurt, you try to figure things out. That’s why in more recent years I have done things about my family. I’m trying to understand why I am the way that I am, which is wholly deficient. Which is one of the reasons I want to do the show in New York. I want to walk into that gallery and look at my stuff and think, “How did this happen? Who am I?” I’m sure I’ll have that reaction.

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