

**University Galleries of Illinois State University (Normal, IL)**

*Phillip Chen: No Ideas but in Things*

6/5/2023-8/13/2023

**Introduction**

This exhibition surveys the work of Phillip Chen, a printmaker and painter born in Chicago in 1953. The works included were made between 1982 and 2010. Altogether, they reveal a consistency of thought that has underpinned Chen's art through several major stylistic shifts.

The exhibition's title is drawn from the poem *Paterson* by William Carlos Williams, and speaks to the unsteady relationship between thoughts, what they are about, and how they are conveyed. Throughout his career, Chen's work has been defined by an oscillation between its philosophical rigor and its commitment to objects in the world. Though deeply conceptual, his approach has always been predicated on the notion that there are "no ideas but in things."

For his delicate early pictures of improbable landscapes, Chen constructed models of sites he imagined, studying them exhaustively to master the peculiarities of their form and the play of light upon them. In his more recent etchings, photographic images of the various artifacts which the artist has spent decades collecting mingle with hand-drawn illustrations of the same. The result is a network of symbols derived from objects Chen has made or acquired, which extends through every work in this exhibition.

The most recurrent of these symbols is the boat. Partly, this is attributable to the capacity of ships to signify change and instability, but also motion and progress. Partly, it relates to Chen's interest in the passage across the Pacific which his ancestors made from China 165 years ago. In the United States, their alienation from the world they had known initiated a search for cultural meaning akin to Chen's own obsession with the mutable meanings of things. It is less a fidelity to these things, however, than a hounding desire to understand how humans imbue them with meaning that has anchored Chen's image-making for more than 40 years.