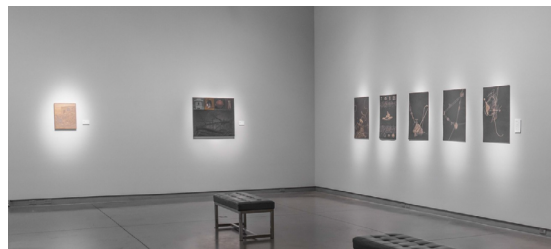


# PHILLIP CHEN

## *No Ideas but in Things*

Educator Handout: Grades 7-12



### ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

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. 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.

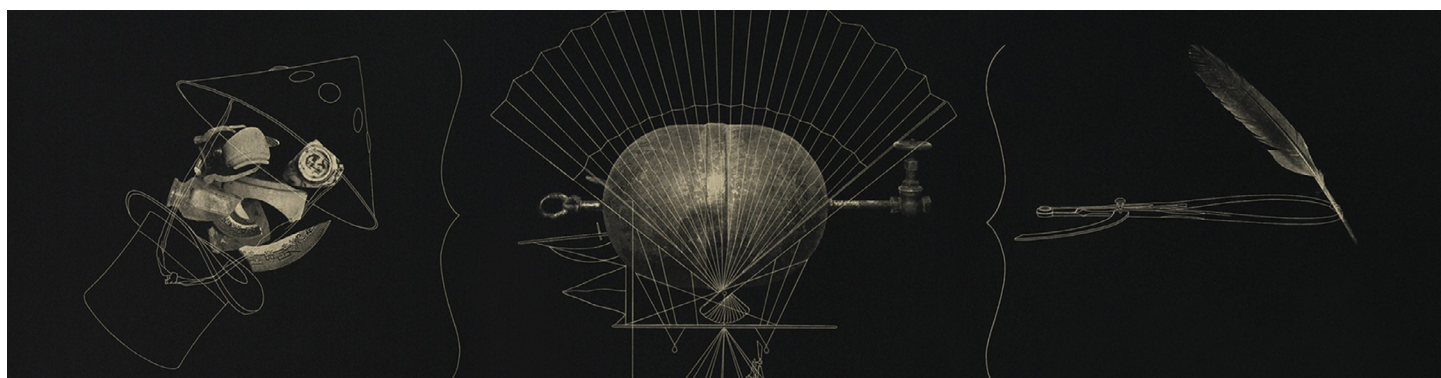
### ABOUT THE ARTIST

Phillip Chen has exhibited extensively both nationally and internationally, and his work is in the collections of institutions such as the Brooklyn Museum, New York Public Library, Carnegie Museum of Art, Art Institute of Chicago, and San Francisco Museum of Fine Arts. His work has been supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, Illinois Arts Council, and Iowa Arts Council. Chen is the recipient of both the Louis B. Comfort Tiffany Award and Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant; in 2018, he received a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship. He has been nominated for the Queen Sonja Print Award 2018, the largest prize given to an artist working in print media worldwide. Chen received a B.F.A. from the University of Illinois at Chicago, and an M.F.A. from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He has taught at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa since 1996.

### VOCABULARY

- **Composition:** the arrangement of visual imagery in an artwork.
- **Medium:** refers to the type of art (such as drawing, printmaking, or painting), as well as the materials an artwork is made from (such as graphite, a zinc plate, or oil paint).<sup>1</sup>
- **Negative space:** refers to the areas between and around the subject(s). However, in Chen's prints, this is reversed. The subject(s) become the negative space as they are revealed by the areas of cream-toned paper left untouched by the black inked surface of the zinc plate.
- **Relief etching:** a printmaking technique where the surface of an etched metal plate (in Chen's case, a zinc plate) is covered in a layer of ink, then pressed onto paper to create a mirror image.
- **Subject matter:** what is portrayed or suggested in an artwork—such as a person, place, or thing.

<sup>1</sup>Tate (n.d.). Art Term: Medium. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/m/medium>.



Top: Installation view, University Galleries of Illinois State University, 2023. Photo credit: Jade Nguyen.

Bottom: *Powhatan: Gunboat Diplomacy* (detail), 2007. Relief etching on Rives BFK tan paper. Courtesy of the artist. Retrieved from: <https://phillipchen1.com/art-work/634478-Powhatan%3a%20Gunboat%20Diplomacy.html>

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

CONNECT - VA:Cn11 - Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

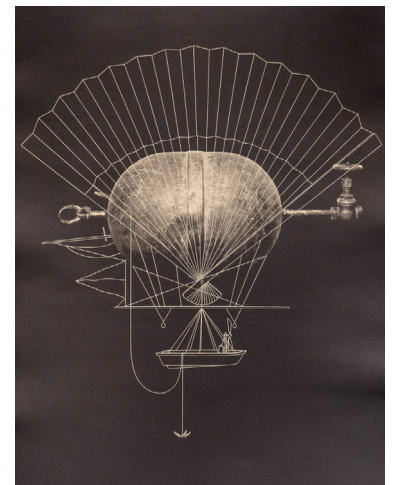
As a descendent of Chinese immigrants who was born and raised in Chicago, Illinois, many of Phillip Chen's works focus on his family and cultural heritage. Through close examination and combinations of objects, Chen investigates whose stories are told, who they are told by, and for whom they are constructed. Some of his works respond to personal experiences and relationships, while others draw from historical events. *Extraction*, for instance, is a **relief etching** Chen created in response to his relationship with his mother. *Powhatan: Gunboat Diplomacy*, on the other hand, is Chen's visual retelling of the United States Navy's 1853 **forced entry** into Japan, which was driven by the desire to strengthen trade routes in East Asia.

Watch this [video](#) as a class to learn more about *Powhatan: Gunboat Diplomacy* and Chen's creative process.

RESPOND - VA:Re7 - Perceive and analyze artistic work.

As a class, use the following prompts to analyze Chen's prints exhibited in *No Ideas but in Things*:

- Chen's prints combine photographs and drawings of items he has collected over the years. Why do you think he references real and historically accurate objects in these works?
- Describe and list the **subject matter** you see in one of Chen's prints. What do you associate with each of these things? Based on their arrangement and relationship to one another in the **composition**, how do you interpret their meaning?
- In **relief etching**, designs are etched—or cut—into the surface of a metal plate with acid. The surface of the plate is then covered in a thin layer of ink and pressed into paper to reveal the etched design. Chen uses black ink. So, the images you see in his prints are the negative spaces, or areas which have been removed from the metal plate. How does this impact the way you read these works?



*Powhatan: Gunboat Diplomacy* (detail), 2007. Relief etching on Rives BFK tan paper. Courtesy of the artist. Photo credit: Jade Nguyen.

CONNECT - VA:Cn10 - Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

Inspired by Chen's work, prompt students to create an artwork that tells a story through purposefully arranged objects and imagery. Provide students with the following instructions:

- Select a personal or historical event or relationship to focus on for your artwork.
  - Consider referencing different sources and/or perspectives to guide your concept development.
  - How has your perspective on this event or relationship has changed over time?
- Create a list of objects you most strongly associate with this event or relationship.
- Sketch or write a variety of ideas for combining these objects to convey a story. Consider how the placement of objects and their scale—or relationship in size—impacts what is communicated to the viewer.
- Share ideas with a classmate. Provide one another with suggestions for conveying your intended message.
- After receiving peer feedback, create a physical or digital collage that combines photographic and drawn representations of your selected objects.

## EXTENSION:

To prepare his designs for etching, Chen combines hand-drawn imagery on tracing paper with photographs printed on transparent sheets. These are then layered on top of a zinc plate coated in a light-sensitive **medium**. The plate is then exposed to UV light to fix—or harden—the design on the plate.

To mimic this process, guide students in making **cyanotype** prints with their selected objects and images.

- Educator resources are available on the exhibition [webpage](#).

You can find [University Galleries](#) on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), and [Vimeo](#) and sign up to receive email updates through the [newsletter](#). Please contact [galleries@illinoisstate.edu](mailto:galleries@illinoisstate.edu) or call (309) 438-5487 if you need to arrange an accommodation to participate in any events related to this exhibition.