Hilo Chen: Seeing Desire

By Sean Gaffney, December 2019

"Focusing on details to create a comprehensive view suggests the spiritual realm of the individual artist, yet extreme realism also implies a formal language that embodies precise rendering."

-excerpt from "Telling Details" exhibition catalog, exhibition at Taipei Fine Arts Museum

Hilo Chen's works can be found in the collections of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Taipei Fine Arts Museum, San Jose Museum of Art, and many other renowned contemporary art institutions. These acquisitions aside, Hilo Chen's contributions to photorealism and contemporary art are as palpable today as they were in the 1970s. In photorealism, Chen has spent a lifetime refining a craft that punctuates this complex form of seeing.

In a genre that draws as much from mass media, and the corresponding photochemical process that facilitates it, the very act of looking can be fraught with optical trap doors and contextual pitfalls. Reminiscent of pop art, photorealism draws its subject matter from the same popular culture. But rather than decontextualize the symbols of pop culture, first wave photorealists like Chen presented these icons in their own original context. Superficially, these subjects seem to project the values of this popular culture, rather than critique. This may account for the art world's often conflicted relationship with the genre. But such image-based projections reveal something abstraction and expressionism cannot. That is, through the painstaking technical skill of photorealism, we are able to read projections of our collective fantasies, and more importantly, we see the way we see these fantasies.

Chen was born in in Yilan, Taiwan in 1942. At 25 years old he graduated university with a Bachelor of Science degree in Architectural Engineering. This degree, with its emphasis on detailed and precise architectural drafting, is the only formal education in "drawing" Chen received. If anything, a background in this field endowed him with an understanding in the importance of control and precision. In 1968 Chen left Taiwan, first for Paris, and then finally settling in New York City, where he would remain until today.

Upon moving to New York City, Hilo Chen continued his humanistic figurative style of painting which began in Taiwan. Works from this period often featured figures presented with a flatness that drew attention itself as painting, in a style far from photorealism. Large, round eyes appear in numerous works to meet the viewers gaze. Notable works from this period include A Friend, 1969, depicting a human form, submerged underwater from the neck down. The torso's inner workings and systems are made visible like clockworks, running horizontally through the work, revealing Chen's relation with the body and unseen systems governing an otherwise placid form. Queen, 1970, also comes from this period. Seated on a bisecting line, like the water level in A Friend, with legs crossed, a Rubenesque nude portrait of Queen Elizabeth II dominates an otherwise minimalist background. Chen's fascination with the body would return in later works, and his female nudes would grow in focus to overtake his canvas and vision.

Two years after relocating to New York Hilo Chen's style began to change. His figures adopted a new realism and were placed in more spatially grounded compositions through his treatment of light. Bits and pieces of the world began to find their way onto Chen's canvas; cups, sidewalks, windows. At the same time, his bodies were fragmented, cut out of the frame in snapshot-like moments. The painter's gaze was more focused, and more detailed, though the moments appear fleeting. Side Walk -4, 1973 possess this temporal quality, with legs in mid-step, and shadows elongated. Most striking, however, Hilo's figures would henceforth no longer meet their viewer's gaze. Faces now turn away from us, or even more eerie, they appear eyeless. A sense of anxiety of seeing can be read.

As Hilo Chen, and New York City, transitioned into the mid-1970s, a shift can be seen. His practice began to make use of the airbrush, allowing for a print-like detail devoid of brush strokes. The quotidian subject matter of his previous style evolved into a fixation with the female body and leisure, that is, a specific kind of American leisure. Women appear rendered in granular detail, with beads of sweat and textured skin. The gaze of the painter becomes more focused on his subject voyeuristically. Chen's photorealistic style can be seen as a blending of his

previous periods, melding his approach to texture and light with his reclining female forms, best represented in his beach series. These works attracted the attention of Louise Meisel, a champion of photorealism and hyperrealism. Meisel's inclusion of Chen to his roster of first wave photorealist masters (like Chuck Close, Richard Estes, and Robert Bechtle) should not be discounted. Chen's contributions to this challenging genre are important, though there still remains a gulf between his achievement and his notoriety outside the specific circle of Photorealism.

Just as context played a key role in presenting the subject of photorealism, we too should consider the works context. Our visual language associated with Chen's specific Beach leisure is mediated through inherited popular color film stocks, like Instant Polaroids and Kodachrome which proliferated throughout the 70s.These tones can be clearly read in Chen's beach series. As Chen developed this specific style of painting, cultural precedents can also be read. By the mid 1970s the sexual revolution had spread from a countercultural movement where it began in the 60s, to the average middle class American. Urban social spaces were thus transformed. This new liberation might be seen in Hilo's fixation on the bikini. Chen's paintings from this period, though readable as expressions of sexual fantasy, also show a cultural shift towards a more open, more stable, more relaxed society. Taken in contrast with his native Taiwan's ongoing martial law, Chen's desires may be read more about social liberation than libido.

Despite the tension between erotic art and contemporary painting found in Chen's work, the artist himself has stated that his subjects are "Color and space. That is what they are about. I work for every detail in the space and want to show the depth of the scene." Perhaps we can read the works from outside of the obvious male-gaze perspective in this light. Chen's accomplishment and contribution to painting should not be relegated to the bawdy. Though full of eroticism, the works use this visual language as a vehicle towards what it is we truly desire, to see, in brave colors, new spaces.

The influence of the West on Chen's practice at once seems obvious. His figures, their settings, the subjects of his paintings, these all seemed informed by western forms and styles. But with a deeper reading, there emerges elements of traditional Chinese painting which can be read in these very western-looking compositions. Such influence can be observed in Chen's painting Talking, 1972 which depicts two figures cut off by the edges of the canvas engaged in conversation, gesturing with their hands. Save for these two partially visible figures on the edges, the work is a solid surface of color where space is made flat through color.

This compositional trait of omission is similar to Southern Song landscape painting styles.
These paintings often focused on smaller, visually closer, and more intimate scenes, while the background was often depicted as bereft of detail as a realm without substance or concern for the artist or viewer. Chen's backgrounds of infinite flat color can be found throughout these early 70s period works and reflect his focus on his anonymous human subject. The rest of existence is tuned out and all attention is paid on partially obscured human forms.

Another traditional compositional technique Chen's work seems to echo is the "one-corner composition" of renowned Song Dynasty painter Ma Yuen. A characteristic feature of many paintings by Ma is the so-called "one-corner" composition, in which the actual subjects of the painting are pushed to a corner or a side, leaving the other part of the painting more or less empty. As with Talking, 1972, in Chen's Sidewalk 4, 1973 viewers can clearly see Chen's preference to push his subject towards the edges of his works like in Ma's classic pieces. This habit of sectioning carried on through the 70s and evolved into Chen's more recent beach series paintings. Figures are confidently grounded in the foreground of these beach works, but always cut off from some edge. With the trappings of western subject and techniques, Hilo Chen weaves a connecting thread that ties him to the tradition of Chinese classicism.

Interest in Chen's work has continued into the present. Despite the art worlds slightly skeptical view towards photorealism, the genre persists. Chen's work was included in Hyperreal, published in 2014 by Juxtapoz, an anthology which featured a large selection of artists working in photorealism and hyperrealism, many of them decades younger than Chen. The prevalence of camera phones has also shifted the conversation as well. No longer in direct parallel with pop art, photorealism seems to speak now more to the question of where snap-shot photography lies today, how photography mediates our lives, self-expression through images, and the modes of

seeing these images today. In this context, Hilo Chen's work, though nude or almost, are certainly not naked. They wear the language of our contemporary times and are adorned with the desires to see.