

YIN-JU CHEN



Portrait of Yin-Ju Chen. Photo by Matt Shapiro. Courtesy the artist and Chi-Wen Gallery, Taipei.

YIN-JU CHEN, *Extrastellar Evaluations*, 2016, still from video, 8 min 27 sec. Photo by Jeff Warrin. Courtesy the artist and Chi-Wen Gallery, Taipei.

Arcane Analyses

BY KERSTIN WINKING

Taiwanese artist Yin-Ju Chen is well known for her videos and installations, which have been presented at film festivals and in exhibitions worldwide, most recently at this year's 20th Biennale of Sydney and in the 2015 solo show "Action at a Distance" at IT Park Gallery in her native Taipei. When Chen and I met in May, she was in the middle of setting up her latest solo exhibition "Extrastellar Evaluations" at the Kadist Foundation in San Francisco. I was curious to ask about how her past and current interests—including imperial history, mind-expanding substances, cosmology, astrology, ideology and American art of the 1960s—had influenced her newest body of work. Heavily research-based, her artworks are often presented in arrangements and settings reminiscent of the workplace of scientists or exhibitions found at science museums. And yet, interestingly, she is fascinated by pseudoscience, which involves theories that depart significantly from widely accepted facts and theses.

Chen started our conversation by indicating that neither she nor I determine what we are saying, but that "invisible forces" do. Looking very serious, she described these "forces" as "a power or push that you can't see or prove scientifically." She further explained by quoting German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer who, in his 1839 treatise *On the Freedom of the Will*, famously wrote: "Man can do what he wills but he cannot will what he wills." Indirectly, Chen's entire practice revolves around the question of what free will is, and what it is that determines a human's will. She researches the forces behind what we desire and looks for answers in astrology, science, pseudoscience, mythology and philosophy. Chen then collates these findings and weaves them together into elaborate narratives, told through a concert of artistic formats arranged in installations comprising moving images, photographs, clippings, objects and drawings. These multimedia installations unfold like stories and the artist further emphasizes their narrative structure by referring to their different elements as "chapters." Each of her stories starts by presenting an event, the point in time and the space around which the narrative takes place.

For her multipart installation *As Above, So Below* (2013–14), the point of departure resulted from an incident in 2013, in which

she fell very ill and spent considerable time in and out of hospitals. This experience, along with the feeling of being held under the power of doctors, became part of the installation through video recordings taken of the artist in the hospital, which were combined with moving images of anonymous experiments involving laboratory mice, blood samples under the microscope, and celestial bodies floating in space. The installation also includes a second video projection showing an endlessly turning spiral, emphasizing how the pattern is one that exists inherently in nature and has been a theme in human-made image production since at least the Bronze Age. The videos are then accompanied by *The Tree of Life*—a drawing whose title refers to a concept that, like the spiral, has been an archetypal theme within art history. The various elements in *As Above, So Below* culminate as an oblique chronicle of the artist's health scare, conveying an emotional roller-coaster ride through a time and space that is somewhat dark and spiritual.

The form of the spiral in *As Above, So Below* is also an allusion—a tribute, even—to the iconic *Spiral Jetty* (1970) by American land artist Robert Smithson, with whom Chen shares the fascination for archaic constructions and the organizational patterns of tribal and prehistoric societies. At the same time, Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* can be seen as a futuristic installation insofar as the artist had speculated on the changing of the jetty over the course of time and made it a part of the artwork. He anticipated the work's "entropic fate," in that, under the second law of thermodynamics, this piece of land art would eventually dissolve and become indistinguishable from its environment. Similarly, Chen conflates the deep past and the far future in her fantastical projects, including some of which attempt to chart the occult.

Such was the premise of "Extrastellar Evaluations" at Kadist, whose backdrop was based on Chen's research involving the 19th-century legend of Lemuria, an apocryphal continent believed to have been located in the Indian or Pacific Ocean. On one wall in the exhibition space hung a handwritten letter signed by "Lucia," who states in the text that she is a medium capable of channeling the Lemurians, the supernatural citizens of Lemuria. Lucia further claims that she has been living among them on

Mount Shasta, a volcanic mountain in Northern California, where they have ended up in modern times. One figure in particular whom Lucia channels is Adama, the spiritual leader of the Lemurians. A video in the exhibition depicts Adama as a young blonde man, who is seen quietly exploring the natural landscape of Mount Shasta.

In another chapter of the show, a diagram with photographs of historic and artistic moments from the 1960s and '70s was hung on the wall. The images are of events from across the globe—including Martin Luther King Jr.'s funeral procession in 1968, the Congo's independence from Belgium in 1960 and the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) in China—juxtaposed with those of conceptual and monumental artworks in which geometrical patterns are a structuring principle, such as Robert Smithson's *Broken Circle* (1971) in the Netherlands and Michael Heizer's *City* (1972–) in Nevada, USA. All the photographs are arranged in a geometrical diagram, much like an astrological constellation. The overall installation seemed to point to a kind of patriarchal conspiracy, one that suggests that much of these events and works are attributed to male politicians and artists, who are then apotheosized for being the orchestrators of such historic happenings. When I pursued this theory with Chen, she responded, "That is how history is taught to us, right?" Relatedly, Chen believes that historiography is similar to astrology as both are, in a way, strategies used by humans to illuminate the past and predict the future. If this is so, her work seems to ask, What should one ultimately choose to believe in—science or pseudoscience?

Chen's work is refreshing in a time when hard science and the technology industry dictate our visions of the future. Through projects such as "Extrastellar Evaluations," she connects to the literary science-fiction subgenre of alternate history. To the artist, it doesn't matter whether a story is true or not, as long as it is well told and inspirational. Working in the tradition of artists such as Smithson, whom she in her imaginative way calls an "alien," Chen makes her own stories. In the future, she would like to expand "Extrastellar Evaluations" by adding the element of a crop circle, again inspired by *Spiral Jetty* as well as the occult phenomenon itself. Perhaps she will let "invisible forces" decide on the perfect time and place for its realization.