

(KCRW)

DESIGN & ARCHITECTURE

Chen Man: Fashion Photographer, Artist and Poster Child For the Post-1980 Chinese

by Frances Anderton, January 7, 2015

One of the darlings of Chinese fashion and photography is making a mark on Los Angeles.

On Tuesday evening a spillover crowd — of largely youthful, fashion-conscious Asians and Asian-Americans — jammed the gallery of the venerable L.A. Louver Gallery in Venice for an appearance by the 34-year old Chinese superstar of fashion and art photography [Chen Man](#), whose work is now on show there in an exhibition called:

ROGUE WAVE PROJECTS: CHEN MAN EAST – WEST / 東 – 西.



Chen Man, right, who is based in Beijing but now owns a home with her family in San Marino, and is herself a model for many an advertising campaign, has a huge following for her highly striking imagery, mostly of stunning young women in dreamlike compositions. The pictures meld photography and elaborate post-production techniques, and they fuse mythology, spirituality, and past political ideology with contemporary materialism to create a shimmering and provocative reflective of the China of her generation, the so-called “post-1980 generation” for whom “money is good.”

Chen Man was born to “[cultural revolution](#)” parents in Mongolia, wound up studying art in Beijing and now runs a studio employing a large team working on her multiple global photo-shoots.



Chen Man addresses the audience at L.A. Louver Gallery; photo, Bennett Stein

In her talk Tuesday night Chen Man walked the audience through the arc of communist Chinese history, from “a country once modest” to “the generation that witnessed material dreams turn into reality” and now “discovered that, it seems like the material world cannot provide all the answers.”

So if her work is on one hand a blatant celebration of bling (while displaying a new reverence for Chinese female beauty), on the other she sees it as a vehicle to explore ancient Chinese philosophies — Buddhism and Taoism — and protection for the environment of a “universal” Earth.



Chen Man, Long Live the Motherland, Shanghai No. 1, 2010, Diasec mounted C-print, 51 7/8 x 51 1/2 in. (131.8 x 130.8 cm), Copyright Chen Man. Courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, CA. This image was shot for the Shanghai Expo and became the cover for a book. Chen Man says “Chinese people think I produce heavily retouched fashion photography, but this image is not retouched. This area was quite high and I just caught the moment.”

Find out how she conveys these seemingly opposing messages, in an interview with DnA below; and feast on a sample of images below from the L.A. Louver exhibition which shows her fashion photography, artwork and, for the first time, her more traditional Chinese paintings.

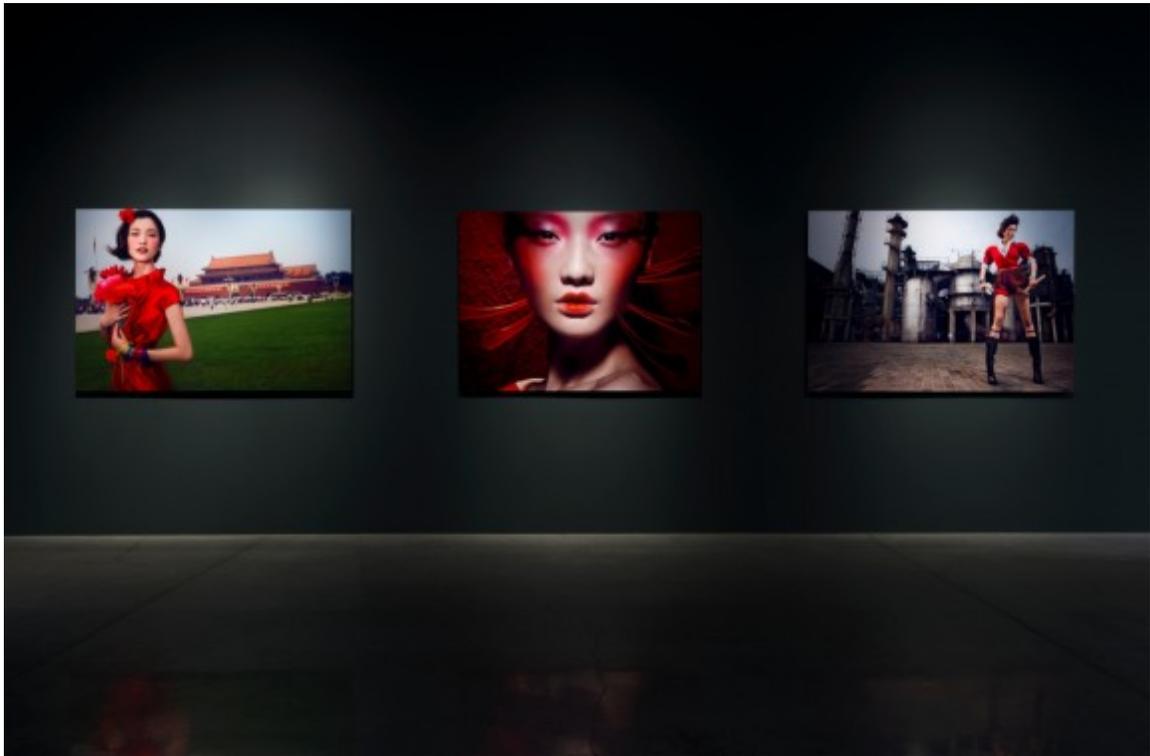
DnA: Your mother was a doctor. Why was she so keen for you to be an artist?

CM: Since childhood, I really enjoyed painting. I lived in a **hutong** (a narrow street or alley) in a small house and once there was a mouse there, under the wall. I saw it and I picked up a pen and drew the mouse. I was two years old and my mom saw I was very good at drawing so she wanted me to have a hard training, you know Chinese moms. So my mom took me to a traditional Chinese master of painting and asked him to be my teacher. In the beginning he refused because I was too young; usually he would not accept such a young kid to do that

kind of painting because it requires patience. But eventually he accepted me. And one year ago I picked up my Chinese brush again.

DnA: What about your father?

CM: He was from the cultural revolution generation, and he was a graphic designer. He drew large revolutionary posters with red huge letters.



Installation of "Chen Man: East-West" at L.A. Louver, 2014; Copyright Chen Man. Courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, CA. The images on the left and right are from the series Long Live the Motherland and were shot for Vogue magazine to mark 60th anniversary of The Republic of China. Left: the 40s and 50s, when Mao's China was born. Chen Man explained that because shooting in Tiananmen Square is not permitted, "soldiers came in and asked what I was doing and they think it's funny because they think maybe I'm shooting a wedding."

DnA: You did a series for Vogue that glamorizes the last 60 years of the Republic of China. They are so interesting in terms of the contrast to your father's idealistic generation. What does your father think of your work?

CM: Of course he is proud of me but he is a traditional Chinese man and he just wants me to be safe. Chinese parents, they want their kids safe and materially comfortable, to get work, buy a house, buy a car, that's all.

DnA: So he's not interested in you being a superstar?

CM: Yes, they are happy but they don't want me too much in the spotlight.



Chen Man, Vision: Gold Fish, 2003, c-print, 52 3/4 x 51 1/4 in. (133.87 x 130 cm), Copyright Chen Man. Courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, CA.

DnA: What about your interpretation of China, and Chinese women and sexuality?

CM: In the beginning I used a lot of heavily touched imagery which was not popular at the time; some people said, they are not like humans, they are like ghosts, and people were shocked because that was not traditionally beautiful.

DnA: You seem to photograph mostly women and very young women, at their most beautiful. Do you have a particular interest in female beauty?

CM: Typically women in China, most of the time they request to be shot by women. They feel more comfortable. But the second and more important reason is that typically most Chinese people like white skin, big eyes, curved hair, high nose. They cannot accept that oriental face with small, long eyes; sometimes they even think that kind of face is ugly. So I pick that kind of typical Asian face and put them in front of those contemporary Chinese backgrounds. I just want to use my professional technique to show contemporary Chinese beauty — this positive, young energy.

DnA: Now you live partly in LA. Do you like it here?

CM: I really fell in love with California because of the sunshine, the beach, the mountains. Here people have everything, here lies the real heaven on earth. But actually I bounce back and forth; I am from China but I do not belong only there. Each of us can now say we are all one universe.

DnA: So it sounds like you believe in a kind of universality, whereas China is quite nationalistic and your work has a strong Chinese identity.

CM: We have so much communication compared to before, so right now we are just part of one Earth.

Chen Man, *Waiting with Respect*, 2013, Chinese ink on paper, 15 3/4 x 14 1/4 in. (40 x 36.2 cm), Copyright Chen Man. Courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, CA. Chen Man recently took up drawing and painting inspired by traditional Chinese calligraphy. Features such as the combing of a thick and thin stroke exemplify her “new fusion style. . . I combine calligraphy language, portrait and traditional techniques together and make them a new kind of style, as in my photography I use the language of graphic design and some photo fusion stuff. My works are a mix and match and use those techniques to tell the story, maybe more stories.”



DnA: Do you plan to carry on doing mainly fashion photography?

CM: Yes, but I also want to shoot movies, I want to use those visual language to tell those concepts. However, fashion photography is a platform, because through the collaboration with the many international brands that I work with I can spread traditional Chinese philosophies, Buddhism and Taoism (Taoist philosophy proposes that the universe works harmoniously according to its own ways and that when someone exerts their will against the world, they disrupt that harmony. . . so one must place their will in harmony with

Chen Man, *Young Pioneer with the Three Gorges*, 2008, Diasec mounted C-print, 53 x 51 in. (134.6 x 129.5 cm), Copyright Chen Man. Courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, CA. Image of young “pioneers” juxtaposed with the Three Gorges dam, one of a series of three that melds past and future Chinese ideals. Chen Man says, “When I was in primary school we students had to wear that kind of dress — the North Koreans still do — but I redesigned a lot of that as you can tell, now it’s a little bit sexy. I use three material dreams to show our generation’s style — CCTV building, Three Gorges Dam and the first space program in which humans went into space. We are so proud of those material dreams. We are following the Western way.”

the natural universe; source: [Wiki](#)).

Actually my main point is about environmental protection for our earth, it's not about the religions, it's about the environment protection. We should not care too much about material objects, because we need to more care about the inside of our heart.

DnA: But your work is very much for the material world. Is that a contradiction?

CM: Now Chinese people are getting used to that kind of information – beautiful stuff, fashionable stuff – and so if I want to share some ideas, that's the best way to do it.

DnA: Do you feel excited to be part of this generation? CM: I feel lucky to be gifted and to be with this talent and able to use this talent now because before there was no fashion industry and I'm just in the right step with this moment.



Chen Man, *Waiting with Respect*, 2013, Chinese ink on paper, 15 3/4 x 14 1/4 in. (40 x 36.2 cm), Copyright Chen Man. Courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, CA. Chen Man recently took up drawing and painting inspired by traditional Chinese calligraphy. Features such as the combing of a thick and thin stroke exemplify her “new fusion style. . . I combine calligraphy language, portrait and traditional techniques together and make them a new kind of style, as in my photography I use the language of graphic design and some photo fusion stuff. My works are a mix and match and use those techniques to tell the story, maybe more stories.”

ROGUE WAVE PROJECTS: CHEN MAN EAST – WEST / 東 – 西 is on exhibition at the L.A. Louver Gallery in Venice through January 31, 2015.

This interview was lightly edited for length and clarity.



Chen Man, Four Seasons: Spring, 2011, c-print, 110 1/4 x 55 in. (280 x 140 cm), Copyright Chen Man. Courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, CA. This is one of a series of four called the Four Seasons. Chen Man says she uses “all of my techniques to tell the philosophy stuff. When you see the spring one, it represents the beginning of the power of those plants stuff. I use young ladies instead of the traditional male soldiers and they combine to tell the power of the wood, the power of the spring.”