

# O C U L A

## Ocula Q&A: Emily Cheng, Artist, New York



Emily Cheng. Image courtesy the artist and Shenzhen Art Museum

Emily Cheng, a Chinese American artist based in New York, is the subject of a major solo exhibition at the Shenzhen Art Museum in September 2015.

Emily received a BFA in painting from the Rhode Island School of Design and then attended the New York Studio School. She has been the subject of numerous solo exhibitions in America including at the Bronx Museum of Arts and Cincinatti's Contemporary Art Center. Outside of America, she has enjoyed solo shows at various institutions, including at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei (MOCA, Taipei); the Metropolitan Museum of Manila and the Ayala Museum in Manila, Philippines.

Her work has been included in numerous group exhibitions such at MASS MoCA; Guangzhou Triennial, Guangdong Art Museum, China; Contemporary Art Museum at USF, Tampa, Florida; Yerba Buena Contemporary Art Center, SF; National Academy of Arts, NY; American Academy of Arts and Letters, NY; Katonah Museum of Art, NY; Hong Kong Art Centre; Sotheby's, NY; Shanghai MOCA; Contrast Gallery, Shanghai; Juan Silos Gallery, Santander, Spain.

Emily Cheng has also been the recipient of several awards including the New York Foundation of the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, Pollock Krasner Award and a Yaddo Fellowship.

---

## **Tell us about your background and your journey into art?**

I began painting in 5th grade and have been at it my whole life. I attended the Rhode Island School of Design and the New York Studio School, pretty hungry to learn about painting.

## **Congratulations on the Shenzhen Museum of Art exhibition. Is this your first large-scale public exhibition in China? How did it come about?**

Yes, it is not only my first solo museum show in China, but my first show which spans 15 years. I did a residency in Shenzhen in 2014 so I was in the area. I was introduced by Johnson Chang to the curator of the Guanshanyue Art Gallery who brought me to the Shenzhen Art Museum, where I met Wendi Xie, the curator. I think we connected immediately. I really love the space of the Shenzhen Art Museum, the way it is laid out and in spite of the largeness of the space, still manages to feel intimate. I love that they focus on one show at a time, so you feel very comfortable exploring the work at leisurely pace.



Emily Cheng, *The Dream*. 188 x 160cm. Oil & acrylic on canvas. Image courtesy the artist and Shenzhen Art Museum

**The exhibition provides an overview of your work since 2002, covering three distinct periods of your practice. Please explain how the curatorial framework of the exhibition evolved and describe the relationship between the three periods of your work included in the exhibition?**

The three periods came about in hindsight quite naturally. For one year my entire focus was painting *Charting Sacred Territories*. The work I did prior to it and the work made subsequently, were naturally a little different. I don't think you can be involved so intensely as I was in the world of religious images without in some way having it affect your work. Other thoughts of course were also factors, as is usually the case when a creative shift is occurring. I had been working with the center (in all that it means) and after *Charting Sacred Territories* I found myself being curious about moving up from the center into large open spaces and scales. In some ways it felt like moving from an interior world to an exterior one. Looking at the self through the world to looking at the world through the universe.

**Does the exhibition include any new works?**

Yes, it includes the work I did in 2014 at the Dawang Residency program, but not work from 2015 produced in New York.



Emily Cheng, *Black Mawangdui*. 213 x 198cm. Oil on canvas. Image courtesy the artist and Shenzhen Art Museum

**In relation to the residency at the Dawang Culture Highland in Shenzhen: how was the experience and what was the impact on your work (if any)?**

I was interested in whether being in a kind of mountain environment would influence my work. I think being out of the urban center is very important for me. I took short runs up the mountain and thought a lot about the culture of the people living on the little Dawang mountain. It was really fascinating to see what challenges they had and how they structured their environment. At the same time, I was thinking about going to Tibet, a great mountain range by comparison, (which I did after I left Dawang) and strange as it may sound, the anticipation itself mysteriously worked on my imagination. Being at Dawang gave me a lot of freedom because there was nobody looking over my shoulder. It feels quite remote, though it is not, from the rest of civilisation. I was able to banish sensorial thoughts, so images just flowed out and together.

**Viewers are immediately struck by the spiritual aura of your works, which have an almost luminous quality. I understand you paint with Flashe, a very fine, vinyl-based paint with characteristics similar to gouache and old tempera paint. Can you tell us a little about your technique?**

I began using Flashe because I didn't have time while I was painting *Charting Sacred Territories* to use oil paint with the drying time of overpainting. I was also rolling 18 feet long paintings which is much trickier to do in oils. What I love about Flashe is the utter matt-ness of the medium. It is a highly pigmented medium so you are right; the color is quite luminous. It dries fast like acrylic but it seems to both absorb then reflect the light in a different way than acrylic. The work I did in Dawang is acrylic because you can't buy Flashe in China.



Emily Cheng, *Sky Mountain*, 2014. 160cm x 145cm. Oil & acrylic on canvas. Image courtesy the artist and Shenzhen Art Museum

**Your source material is taken from all aspects of visual culture, much of it from Eastern and Western spiritual traditions. If you had to sum up your work, is there a key message or theme you are trying to communicate?**

I am thinking about large subjects. Some of it gets into the work and is very accessible, others seep out with repeating viewing. I don't know if I could or would want to sum up my work in words. We are such a logocentric society that we have convinced ourselves that the word is more factual than visual material. I'm still staunchly committed to the power of visual experience. Why would I want to take that pleasure from anyone? It's the ultimate gift from the artist. In work that is highly conceptual, it is very helpful to understand the parameters of the work, so you are thinking in the right neighborhood. But even then the words are just pointers. When they succinctly sum up, there is less meat for the viewer to chew.

**What else are you working on now?**

I'm working on a group of large paintings in New York which continue my fascination with trying to visualise energy, conceptions of the universe and our vantage point in all of this. Yes, I know. It sounds pretty nebulous. —[O]