

## **Found in Translation: Chen Peng's "Soft Anchors"**

by Jason Lipow

Chen Peng and I met in graduate school as students in the painting program at Boston University. Peng grew up in Taiwan, and studied philosophy at National Taiwan University, before moving to the United States to study painting at the Cleveland Institute of Art. A passionate advocate for the wellbeing of animals, Peng maintained connections to various Taiwanese animal rights groups.

When we met at BU, Peng had been living in Cambridge, Massachusetts for a few years. Peng's husband would sometimes drop Peng off at the studios in their sedan, and her dog Sasa, a 15 year old mutt with black fur and gray whiskers, would hoist her small frame up to the back window to watch Peng leave.

Sasa grew increasingly sick in our second year of grad school, and passed away midway through the year. Peng processed much of her grief through a series of portraits of Sasa. In these paintings, Sasa appears curtained by veils of snow. The black coat of Sasa's fur becomes a gray-blue, imbued with a diffuse, cool winter light.

While these paintings of Sasa do not appear in "Soft Anchors," they inform the lexicon of images that populate this more recent body of work. In "Soft Anchors," Peng presents a range of still-life paintings that function like shrines. Their subjects, like the fetish objects in a makeshift shrine, find their value in allusion. Each function as vessels for memory, allowing disparate experiences to coexist in the provisional space of a table-top arrangement.

In *Waiting for the Ghost*, for example, one of Peng's portraits of Sasa reappears in a pink table-top frame as a kind of still-life object. As a painting-within-a-painting, it becomes a brief vignette of wintry intensity in an otherwise quiet and unmoving image. Beyond the portrait, a clear blue-black sky and the crisp black shadows of houseplants envelop the painting with a dissonant calm. An alarm clock in the painting's lower right shows that the time is nearly midnight, and a huge, caricaturistic moon hovers with a strange closeness, overlapping the houseplants' dark silhouettes with a warm, ethereal glow. I wonder whether this moon reflects the light of the sun, as does the real moon, or whether it is a still-life object that has become unhinged from the gravity of the table-top. In the surreal space of this painting, Sasa feels present despite the veils of snow and layers of illusionism that distance her from corporeality. Her image appears here as near to the viewer as the moon, somewhere between presence and memory. *Waiting for the Ghost* exists as an image of remembrance and mourning – an invitation for memory's quiet coexistence with lives that continue to move forward.



Chen Peng – *Waiting for the Ghost*, watercolor and oil on canvas, 40 x 30 inches, 2024

After graduate school, Peng adopted two dogs, Kara and Oke, whom she often refers to jointly as “Kara-Oke.” The dogs had been strays and cared for by the employees at a tire shop in Taiwan. When it closed, they were left behind and hung around the karaoke parlor that took the tire shop’s place. The organization that rescued Kara and Oke named them after the location.

Kara appears much more frequently than Oke in Peng’s paintings. The speckled light-brown of his hair, Peng explained, makes his facial expressions easier to read than Oke’s. (Oke is mostly black, and tends to look sadder than she feels). Kara is a prominent feature of two complementary paintings that hang side-by-side in “Soft Anchors” – *Morning Routine* and *Evening Routine*. The paintings mirror each other, each depicting small, sculptural objects in a still-life that fills a receding, flat surface in the foreground: a cartoon rabbit, a small clock, grass-like fronds, a green plastic bag with a cartoon dog printed across its surface, and two lumpy, green, conical forms that recall the ambiguous monoliths of Monet’s haystacks. The



receding plane on which the objects rest has the appearance of a table-top, but small dashes of green lines across its surface complicate this read; it becomes a kind of iconographic representation of a field, scattered with small tufts of grass.



Left: *Morning Routine*, oil on canvas, 40 x 30 inches, 2024



Right: *Evening Routine*, oil on canvas, 40 x 30 inches, 2024

Peng refers to the conical mounds as bushes, and showed me that they are not just pictorial inventions, but real ceramic objects that she sculpts and arranges around her apartment. The cartoon rabbit, small clock, and grass-like fronds, too, are representations of ceramic sculptures – planar forms that she props up with hidden wooden stands in the way that a theatre director might populate a stage set. The objects function primarily as signs; they suggest the idea of a bush, a rabbit, a clock, or grass, but never purport to “be” the things themselves.

In both paintings, the still-life arrangements cut off sharply in the middle of the compositions. At left, a vertical plane rises to meet the top edge of the canvas, decorated with a pattern of daisies, functioning as a backdrop to the still-life before it. The top right corners of the paintings open onto fields of color. Against the daisy backdrop, Peng leans another painting-within-a-painting: a portrait of Kara in a field of grass. Kara’s portrait casts a shadow on the flower-patterned surface behind it, as much a still-life object as it is an image.

Both *Routine* paintings are 40 by 30 inches, and the objects within them appear at roughly twice the size of their referents. At this scale, the paintings read less like still-lives, and more like landscapes. Where the table-top ends, abrupt expanses of color begin; the transition is a kind of horizon line. It is easy for a viewer to imagine themselves in the scale of one of Peng's figurines, 5 or 6 inches tall, walking between the still-life objects as if it were a table-top forest.

Between the two paintings, Peng shifts and rearranges the still-life objects as modular elements, reflecting shifts in the time of day, and traces of activity in the interim. Like Monet's haystack paintings, the most prominent contrasts between *Morning* and *Evening Routine* occur in their representations of light. *Morning Routine* presents a broad spectrum of warm greens; hard-edged shadows drop from the objects and recede towards the top left of the composition. *Evening Routine* is bathed in a cool blue evening light; its shadows are more diffuse than *Morning Routine*'s, and gesture casually to the right with soft edges. Then there is the obvious shift in the backdrop. Where Kara looks towards a yellow-green field of color in *Morning Routine*, a clear sky meets his gaze in *Evening Routine*, identifiable through a distant, just-barely-perceptible crescent moon. The clock reads just before 6 pm, and the sky unfolds in a lush dawn gradient from blue to orange.

In *Evening Routine*, a green plastic bag that lays flat on the table in *Morning Routine* appears to have been filled. I recognize the cartoon dog on its surface as the mascot for "Earth Rated" dog poop bags. The ceramic rabbit from *Evening Routine* is no longer wide-eyed and eager, but content, now facing inward toward the center of the painting. Side-by-side, *Morning* and *Evening Routine* become bookends to the experience of a day.

As I sat with Peng's paintings, it dawned on me that none of her paintings depicts her dogs directly: each representation is a painting-of-a-painting, or a painting-of-a-sculpture. Like the forms within Henri Matisse's *Red Studio*<sup>1</sup>, Peng's images of dogs are embedded in layers of representation that obscure their nature as painting, sculpture, or real-thing.

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<sup>1</sup> "Henri Matisse. The Red Studio. Issy-Les-Moulineaux, Fall 1911 | MoMA."



Chen Peng - *Apple Time*, watercolor and oil on canvas, 40 x 30 inches, 2024

In *Apple Time*, for example, Peng depicts a sheet of lined paper inscribed with a line drawing of Kara's face protruding from the neck of an embroidered denim shirt. The effect is that of a kind of anthropomorphic effigy, part-scarecrow, part-Anubis. It would be scary if it wasn't so goofy.

Peng explained that the paintings were a record of her relationship with her dogs – a feeling of companionship and responsibility that doesn't demand for their presence in the studio with her. The additional layer of representational distance between the paintings and her dogs untethers the images from the indexical specificity of a singular moment. Instead, the paintings speak more clearly as records of routine – of the patterns of repeated behaviors and expectations that punctuate the lives of dog and owner.

The notion of repetition and routine seems to be a consistent thread throughout Peng's work. In nearly all of the paintings in "Soft Anchors," Peng includes a clock or timepiece among the



still-life objects. The clocks indicate the time of day, but they also bring their own personalities and associations into the paintings.

In *Enjoying the Nature*, a clock face dominates the left half of the composition. Like the moon in *Waiting for the Ghost*, the clock hovers just beyond the edge of the table in the foreground, yet its face is semi-transparent. Sunny, green pastures and blue skies are visible beyond and through the clock. In lieu of numbers, illustrations of songbirds indicate the hours. In the lower right corner of the painting, Peng uses bold white lines to delineate the contours of a mug and the decorative cartoon dog on its surface. The mug is more icon than object – squiggly lines rise above the mug in a cartoon representation of steam – and its body is completely transparent, presenting a clear view of the tabletop on which it rests and the fields receding behind it.



Chen Peng - *Enjoying the Nature*, acrylic and oil on canvas, 40 x 30 inches, 2024

*Enjoying the Nature* maintains a kind of waking-dream-state, in which visions of nature become more real than the objects that populate the foreground of the composition. Painting is, after all, as much an internal, psychological process, as it is a physical act. The picture plane functions as a site where visions from the “mind’s eye” might materialize as both image and object. In its overt dissolution of the objects in the foreground, *Enjoying the Nature* speaks most clearly to the transmutative quality of her works – sites where immaterial memory becomes externally tangible form.



Chen Peng – *Rain is Coming*, watercolor and oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches, 2024

In *Rain is Coming*, Peng renders a similarly metaphysical scene in which a handmade mug appears to transcend the simplicity of its form and becomes a kind of externalization of memory. Here the mug appears in four iterations; each shows the mug in a different orientation as it spins in a slow rotation. I'm reminded of the spatial distortions of Cézanne's apples or Braque's still-lives, in which multiple viewpoints of a single object might exist simultaneously within the same picture plane. Each iteration of the mug is huge, about the size of my outstretched hand, and its implied rotation gives it the totemic quality of an object in a museum vitrine or jewelry store display case. In each iteration, the mugs contain what appears to be a pool of clear blue water. Beyond, clouds churn in billowing cascades of gray. There is a dissonance between the Constable-esque storms and the calm, untroubled cerulean of the mug waters. Not only do they lack any reflection of the clouds, but they seem to reflect another sky altogether.

Across the black surfaces of the mugs, opaque white lines delineate the contours of clouds and trees with a cartoonish shorthand that is at odds with the illusionistic rendering of the landscape in front of which the mugs hover. Captions appear in multiple languages: English, Japanese, and Chinese. The only text that I can understand is the one written in English, "Rain is Coming!", but Peng translates the Japanese and Chinese captions respectively: In the top right mug, an arrow points to a cartoon rabbit with the caption "これなに?" or "What is this?," and in the mug beneath it, the caption "啊啊 啊啊 啊啊 !!!" or "Ahhhhhhh!!!" borders a post-storm landscape in which

a rainbow has taken the place of the former's storm clouds. The mugs' captioned illustrations trace the passing of a storm, yet they trade self-serious naturalism for playful narration.

In this painting, I think about how the word vessel might be understood as a container, not just of water, but of experience. Indeed, all of the paintings in "Soft Anchors" function as vessels – places where a multiplicity of disparate experiences, memories, and languages that make up a life might coexist.

Robert Frost is often quoted as saying that "Poetry is what is lost in translation"<sup>2</sup>. Peng's paintings suggest that the opposite may be equally true. In her use of multiple painting languages to juxtapose the biographic and surreal, Peng presents a vision of an interior life subject to constant transformation through translation. In the heterogenous languages of "Soft Anchors," memories of past experiences might coexist with preoccupations of the present.

Rain is coming, and the storm has already passed.

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**Jason Lipow** is a multi-disciplinary artist and educator from southeastern Pennsylvania. He holds an MFA in Painting from Boston University (2022), and a BA in Studio Art and Creative Writing from Brandeis University (2017). Lipow currently teaches as an Assistant Professor of Art at Cedar Crest College in Allentown, Pennsylvania.

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<sup>2</sup> Robinson, Peter. "What Is Lost?" Chapter. In *Poetry and Translation: The Art of the Impossible*, 23–47. Poetry &... Liverpool University Press, 2010.