

AI AND I

Award winning artist shares her new vision in art and technology with *Glass* her new vision in art and technology.

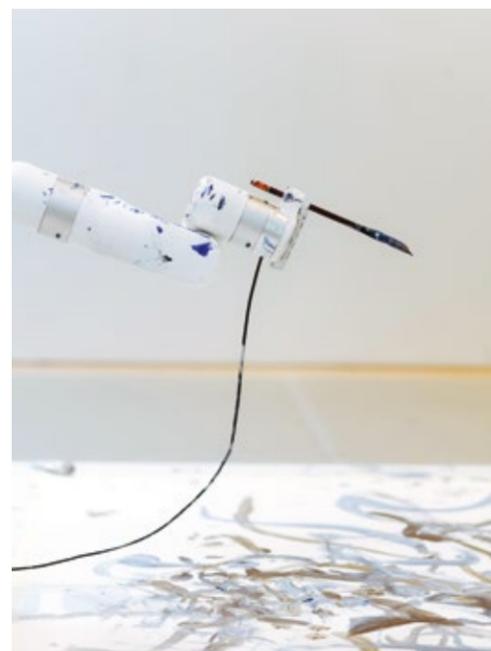
Writer CHARLIE NEWMAN

Chinese-Canadian artist and researcher Sougwen Chung's artistic journey could be lifted out of a Marvel comic. Her superpower? Combining technology with the human touch. This might sound like an unlikely jarring duo, two competing energies fighting for dominance, but Chung's entire existence seems to be in a constant dialogue with oppositions. "Culturally, I'm Chinese, part of two generations of diaspora that moved to Hong Kong and Brazil, eventually immigrating to Canada where I grew up." As a result, she lives "this feeling of existing between worlds, culturally or otherwise. It's a common thread of people from a diasporic upbringing I've found. It threads its way into the work, an interest in creating belonging, making marks, and leaving traces."

As a child Chung was surrounded by magnificent contrast — her father was an opera singer, her mother a programmer. "I grew up with computers and music and felt a natural affinity towards both." By the age of nine, she had coded her first website, played the violin to a high standard, and "liked to draw more than I liked to talk, some things don't change!" Cast your mind back to school and you'll remember how the pupils in the computer room weren't often found also playing in the school orchestra, but not in Chung's case. "The expressive abstract form of sound and instrumentation through being a classically trained musician, the generative beauty of music theory, and the structure of code and screen-based work made a lot of sense to my brain. The moment when I felt they could work together was the first time I drew with my first robot, D.O.U.G._1" — Drawing Operations Unit Generation.



Sougwen Chung, Photo Credit: Aki Akiwumi

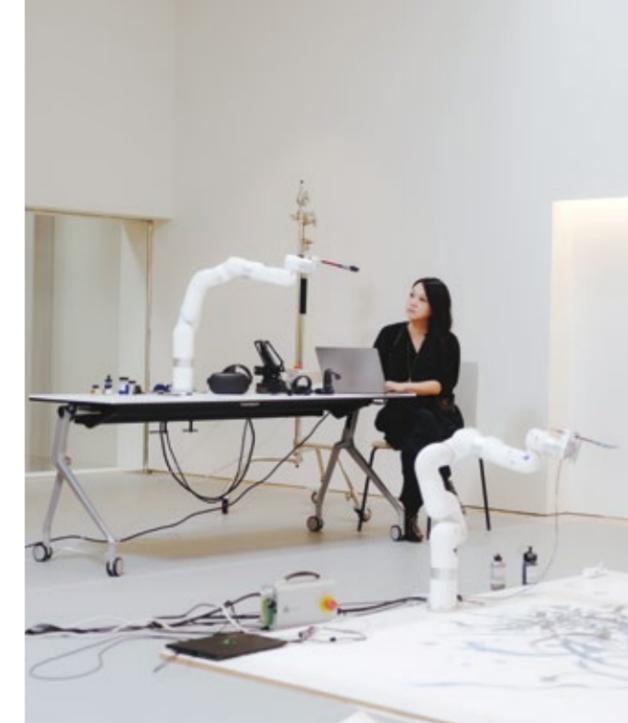


Studio Scilicet, 2022. Photo Credit: Dan Wilton

In Chung's 2019 Ted Talk, *Why I Draw With Robots*, she asks "how does our desire for perfection, precision and automation affect our ability to be creative?" For her first experimentation with robotics, Chung "would lead and it would follow." D.O.U.G._1 did not follow flawlessly, however, Chung found that this made the work more interesting. Since then she has built two more and worked collectively alongside 20 robots, purposely designing them "to fail, experiment, to relinquish control – that can be very liberating; sometimes we all need those reminders."

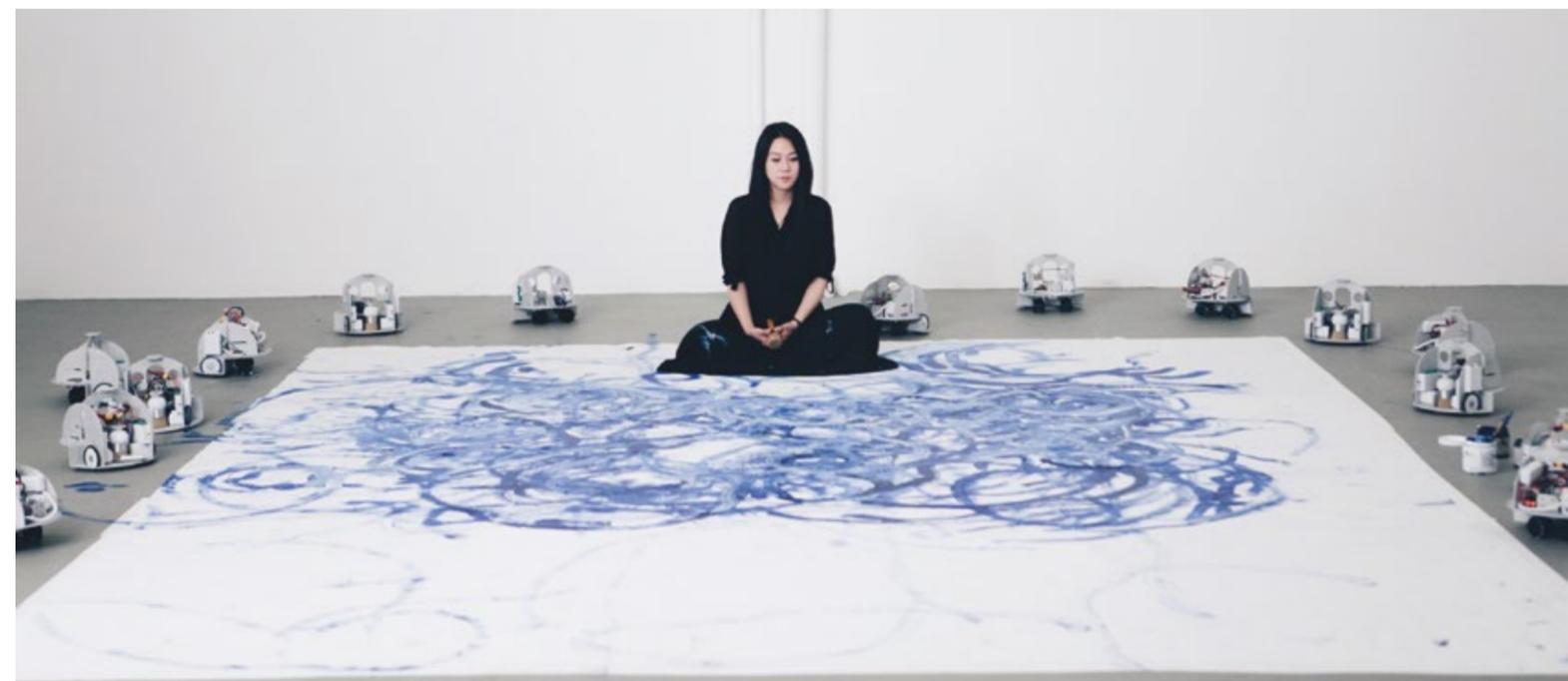
For Chung, technology and art share a symbiotic relationship. "I think it's where philosophy and technology intersect. Doing this work has taught me how embracing imperfection can actually teach us something about ourselves. It's taught me that exploring art can actually help shape the technology that shapes us. And it's taught me that by combining AI and robotics with traditional forms of creativity, visual arts in my case, [they] can help us think a little bit more deeply about what is human and what is the machine. It has led me to the realisation that collaboration is key to creating a space for both as we move forward."

The viewer can collaborate with Chung's art also in her solo exhibition, *Virtual Ink*, in London's Gillian Jason Gallery. Through the lens of an iPad, you can literally walk through Chung's brushstrokes that dance throughout the gallery. "If, like the saying goes, a line is a dot going on a walk, then in *Virtual Ink* we're skydiving. Each drawing in the series is an environment, sculpted in VR with custom software. From the standpoint of making the work, it's an entirely new approach to drawing, where the blank canvas dissolves and the line can extend in 3 dimensions." Weaving in between her gestural strokes, you feel the energy of drawing in a digital landscape. This is not a lifeless, monotone use of technology but expressive and lively, a perspective we're not well acquainted with. You can live through it, and explore its



Studio Scilicet, 2022. Photo Credit: Dan Wilton

Sougwen Chung, *Omnia per Omnia* performance with D.O.U.G._L.A.S. (Drawing Operations Unit: Generation_3 Live Autonomous Systems), 2018



angles, all the while marvelling at Chung's entirely unique artistic process using a Virtual Reality headset. Chung's energetic portraiture and still life swirl across paper and hanging layers of silk, are to be enjoyed across all mediums. If you were to stumble across these works you wouldn't believe artificial reality would be behind them, they feel far too visceral for that. Chung's line nods to her cultural heritage of Chinese traditional painting, breathing new life and new vision into them. "Without stewardship and invention, traditions like drawing, penmanship, and craft become lost, like endangered experiences." In Chung's practice, space is made for them both to flourish, "there's a need for more reconciliation of tradition and technology instead of an erasure of one for another."

Chung breathes a new vision into technology reminding us that it "isn't good nor bad, nor is it neutral. Technologies such as the ones in AI systems, the algorithms employed by social platforms, and many more shape culture, and that can and should be questioned and challenged. What's vital about art shaping the development of technology is that it brings experimentation, inquisitiveness, weirdness and play into these technical systems, which not only creates a breadth of expression but its very existence is a form of critique." A lot of people fear technology, with some governing bodies actively encouraging us to do so, but with Chung, it feels like a safe place, for we can often forget that "the human hand is always present. It's far from the omnipotent AI we've been told to believe in." From a distance, the digital world might feel like it lives in another realm but for Chung, "It's all physical. The virtual is just a different type of physicality, a designed tangibility perhaps."

Chung describes her artistic journey using AI as "peaceful, grounding, subliminal and disconcerting", vocabulary often aligned with meditation, a practice she reconnected with during lockdown. This autumn Chung will be exhibiting at Finland's EMMA museum group show, In Search Of The Present, addressing "the practice of meditation extended to a machine to explore alternative ways of being present and understanding shared presence." Chung lights up when describing Assembly Lines, "a shared space of reflection, within a kinetic multi-robotic painting installation [where] the floor, [and] the walls of the exhibition [are] covered in lines. The robotic movement is catalysed by my own brain waves captured with an EEG headset during meditation and painting. Assembly Lines is really an offering; a provocation to ruminate on ritual, biofeedback and painting embodied through my machines. I honestly can't wait for people to experience it in person."



A gift of the disaster, Sougwen Chung, print on hanging silk, 209 x 106 cm, 2022



Sougwen Chung, Drawing Operations Unit: Generation_2 (MEMORY), 2016

Her pioneering work is celebrated across the globe. Chung's work has featured in Vancouver, Miami, Tokyo, Singapore, New York and Geneva. In 2019, she was awarded the Lumen Prize for Art in Technology and Woman of the Year in Monaco for achievement in the Arts and Sciences. As a former research fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Lab, Chung continues to explore human and non-human collaboration through her newly launched London-based studio, Scilicet. "The vision is a space to explore art, research, philosophy and technology in a way that doesn't exist yet, working in partnership with our network of collaborators and friends." Scilicet currently has a satellite in Amsterdam and plans for another in Hong Kong in 2023.

After over ten years of tireless innovation in art and design, Chung is changing the game. "I've come to think of technology as data science, computer vision, and algorithms sure, but it's also beyond the computational. It's inclusive of craft, of cartography, of medicine...The more we

extend our way of thinking, the more we advocate for a greater plurality of technological development and engagement."

Chung's philosophical theory may certainly feel hefty but her work withholds an ethereal weightlessness to it. Post-pandemic, the world can feel individualistic but we can seek solace in her "borderless" work. Chung wonders, "maybe the future of human creativity isn't in what it makes but how it comes together to form new ways of making. I'm really keen to find out."

sougwen.com
scilicet.xyz
gillianjason.com
emmamuseum.fi