



# THE NEW YORKER

ART MAY 15, 2017

## IAN CHENG'S ALTERNATE REALITIES AT MOMA PS1

*Landscape and consciousness evolve over eons in "Emissaries."*

MOMA PS1 | 22-25 Jackson Ave., Queens | 718-784-2084

By Andrea K. Scott



*Shiba Inus and an undead celebrity roam an Earthlike planet in a far-off future, in a still*

*from Ian Cheng's digital simulations, "Emissaries."*

Image courtesy the artist

What if a work of art was so smart that it could free itself from the artist who made it? The digital whiz Ian Cheng takes a deep dive down that wormhole with "Emissaries," a trio of color projections, now unfolding in three rooms at MOMA PS1, which he describes as "video games that play themselves." These simulations are set millennia apart in the same landscape, which evolves from volcano to lake to atoll. (Politically minded viewers might grok a cautionary climate-change tale.) The characters start out shamanic and end up sci-fi. They include, by time line, a prophetic owl and the plucky daughter of a village elder (a prehistoric Arya Stark), a pack of Shiba Inus and an undead celebrity (a skeleton with sunglasses intact), and a meerkat-like race of futurist ranchers. Activity unfolds in real time according to rules programmed by Cheng and his collaborators, but, as in life, rules do not control outcome.

The thirty-three-year-old artist, who studied cognitive science at Berkeley and worked at the visual-effects company Industrial Light & Magic before earning his M.F.A., at Columbia, is fond of a quote by Philip K. Dick: "Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away." The same might be said of Cheng's alternate realities. Even when the museum is closed, "Emissaries" continues, thanks to a live stream on the Web site twitch.tv, which plays twenty-four hours a day. During a recent visit to the exhibition, I never encountered the owl—whose existence I learned of in a handsome, diagram-laden brochure that Cheng designed—but the dogs were busy dodging laptops, furniture, and a Brancusi sculpture, which floated by as they swam in the lake. The meerkat-ish tribe, whom Cheng has dubbed "Oomen," just huddled forlornly on barren terrain.

They reminded me of the abandoned family on David Bowie's home planet in Nicolas Roeg's 1976 movie "The Man Who Fell to Earth." The association isn't entirely random, given Cheng's canny use of cinematic techniques, from omniscient aerial views to extreme closeups. But this isn't a movie, and expectations of conventional narrative should be checked at the door. Cheng has said, "I hate that art is given the burden of having to be meaningful. I

think this is a misunderstanding. Maybe the real purpose of art is to wrestle with the relationship between meaning and meaninglessness and how they transform each other.”

Cheng’s project is impressive, even profound, but it is not without precedent. Chance operations have been central to art since the mid-twentieth century. Matthew Ritchie has been visualizing character-driven cosmologies for more than twenty years; Paul Chan’s postapocalyptic video cycle “The 7 ~~Lights~~” is another touchstone. And the compassion of Cheng’s transhumanist vision aligns him with a cohort of other young artists working in New York, staying awake as they dream of the future. ♦

*This article appears in other versions of the May 15, 2017, issue, with the headline “Never-Ending Story.”*

Sign up for a weekly list of the best things happening in New York City and beyond.

Enter your e-mail

Go

## GOINGS ON IN ART

Through Aug. 20.

**Carlo Zinelli**

American Folk Art Museum  
Uptown

Through Oct. 29.

**Adrián Villar Rojas: The Theater of Disappearance**

Metropolitan Museum  
Uptown