

## Art Agency, Partners

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## Art's New Frontier

### Market Spotlight: Ian Cheng



Ian Cheng, *Emissary in the Squat of Gods* (2015). Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

By  Meredith Kirk

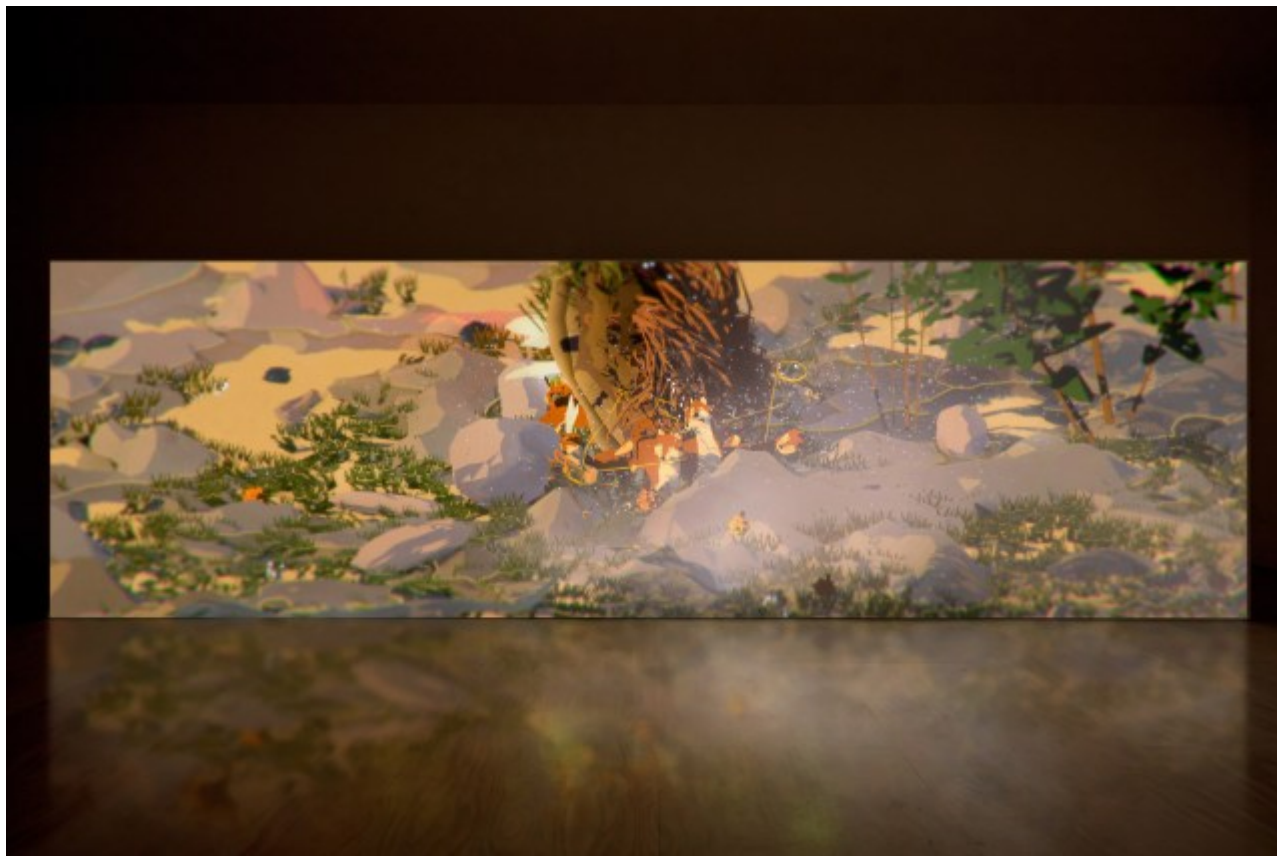
director of collections development at AAPwith  Charlotte Burns

executive editor of *In Other Words*

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On face value, [Ian Cheng](#)'s art is a brilliant manipulation of cutting-edge technology and virtual gaming systems. Dig a little deeper, and it is a manifesto on human behavior and potential. One of the few artists working in new media to have truly captured the attention of the art world, buzz began to build around Cheng's work several years ago, around the time he created *Bad Corgi* (2015)—“a shadowy mindfulness app for contemplating chaos”—as a digital commission for the [Serpentine Galleries](#) in London.

This “neurological gym”, as Cheng termed it, lay the foundations for what would follow: works of art that aim to retrain the viewer's brain—“The best art, the art that really moves me, is like a Trojan horse,” he said on [a recent \*In Other Words\* podcast](#). “Really, it gets you to exercise like a muscle the minimal necessary limbic functionality you need to feel safe enough to be explorative, to be open-minded, to be conscientious.”



Ian Cheng, *Emissaries* (2017) at MoMA PS1. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

Raised in California by two graphic designers, and currently living and working in New York, Cheng has parlayed his dual undergraduate degree from [UC Berkeley](#) in cognitive science and art practice and an MFA in visual arts from [Columbia University](#), into a pioneering artistic practice. Cheng, who worked at George Lucas’s visual-effects and animation studio, [Industrial Light & Magic](#), as well as with artists [Paul Chan](#) and [Pierre Huyghe](#), now works with a team to bring his ideas to life. In 2015, he founded [Metis Suns](#), a production company dedicated to world building — the process of constructing an imaginary world—and the development of his ongoing projects. He credits the producer and writer Veronica So with facilitating the expansion of his practice.

Cheng’s real breakthrough moment came in late 2017 when MoMA PS1 exhibited *Emissaries* (2015-17) to rave reviews. The work comprises three live simulations, each part of a narrative trilogy, that take place on a fictitious volcanic island. Cheng programmed three key characters (the emissaries) with motivations and personalities that guide their actions and let them loose in self-playing video games where the characters control their own outcomes in real time. MoMA was so impressed with *Emissaries* that it acquired an edition of the trilogy before Cheng had fully completed the work (each *Emissaries* trilogy is unique and is part of a series of seven with three artist’s proofs).

## His practice will continue to have a profound impact on the art world

Shortly thereafter, [Gladstone Gallery](#) began representing the artist. “We try to keep current with what artists outside of our program are doing, and Ian seemed outstanding when we first saw his work. He is exploring territories throughout the worlds of art and technology in ways that seem current and urgent,” says Max Falkenstein, a partner at the gallery. “The work is pictorial, sensitive, and narrative in a way that comes together in a logical and enticing way. It seems inevitable that his practice will continue to have a profound impact on the art world.”

Topping off a career-changing year, Cheng was the 2017 recipient of [Fondation Louis Vuitton](#)’s Award for the Filmic Oeuvre (he had previously won prizes including the [Eisner Award for Film and Video](#) (2006) and the New Director’s Showcase award from the [Cannes Lion International Festival of Creativity](#) in 2013).

Cheng’s first show at Gladstone Gallery was “[BOB](#)” (31 January-23 March 2019), which centered on an AI creature—whose name is an acronym of “Bag Of Beliefs”—first “born” at the artist’s two-part exhibition at the Serpentine Galleries in London in 2018. This work—and new work spawned from it, a series of lightboxes that feature comic book-style illustrations of how BOB might interact in the real world—will be on show at the [58th Venice Biennale](#) this month (curated by Ralph Rugoff, the

exhibition is entitled “May You Live In Interesting Times” and runs from 11 May-24 November).

Meanwhile, *Emissary Forks at Perfection* (2015-16)—the second chapter of *Emissaries*—is currently on view in a group show at MoMA curated by Michelle Kuo and titled “*New Order: Art and Technology in the Twenty-First Century*” (until 15 June).



Ian Cheng, *Emissary Forks at Perfection* (2015) at MoMA PS1. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

There is no public information about market prices since Cheng’s work has not come to auction, but the primary market is strong, Falkenstein says. “People might be surprised, but the work resonates with a broad mix of curators and collectors; there is not one type of collector or demographic interested in Ian’s work,” he adds. There is, he says, an “urgency” to collect Cheng’s work “because there is so much scholarship and opportunity for discourse around the new technological and artistic avenues he is exploring. Specifically, with BOB, there is an element of community participation in which the general public is able to directly connect to the AI technologies Ian is experimenting with and understand how they work in a tangible and educational way that is not alienating.”

Ian Cheng is participating in the [58th Venice Biennale](#), “May You Live in Interesting Times”, curated by Ralph Rugoff and on view from 5 May to 24 November.