

Leah Ke Yi Zheng
Machine(s)
March 21 – May 10, 2025

Surfacing: On Leah Ke Yi Zheng

The first thing a viewer might notice about Leah Ke Yi Zheng's *Leibniz's Machine* (2024) is that, like all her canvases, it's not rectangular. The painting's frame is a bit skewed, a little off, and points to something outside itself that we barely notice, a clandestine convention: that almost all paintings are rectangular. The second thing we grasp, if it wasn't the first, is that we're looking at technology – albeit technology circa 1694, when the German mathematician Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz completed his stepped reckoner, the first mechanical calculator, which would have profound effects on navigation, natural science and commerce; this beautiful, highly paintable object, which here seems almost to be transforming into a kind of tiered landscape, is a part of the roots of our modern, finance- and tech-centric world. Yet money and technology today are virtually abstractions, lacking visual signatures. Paying attention to an iPhone, say, there's not much to see (or paint) except its sleek featureless chassis. *Leibniz's Machine*, rewinding into an age of gear-heavy visible materiality, is a painting 'of' the unseen omnipresent aspects that govern modern reality, whether we're standing in a gallery or out in the world.

Here's another thing we probably don't see, maybe don't know: Leibniz was very inspired, in making his uber-rational device, by the I Ching, or Book of Changes, the ancient Chinese divination text that has never made claims to rationality. So at the roots of our math-driven and financialized world is Asian mysticism, even chanciness; logic subtly bent, like a warped frame. Zheng's art, too, is the result of a back-and-forth; the US-based artist trained initially in traditional Chinese painting techniques, and she paints on silk. Silk, especially when combined with Zheng's fondness for suspending paintings in midair, lets light travel aleatorily through it, destabilizing the painting itself. Art, here, becomes a shifting conversation *with* light, and with the viewer's physical mobility and mental interpretation (we all have our own thoughts on technology, most likely; we all see, too, art through our cultural conditioning, as this work might remind us). Painting, under these auspices, is no longer a fixed, static thing or one-way-transmission but a changeable dialogue. And if the background context of Zheng's art is that technology is an agent of control – as we're increasingly discovering – then it might matter that her art is a free, mutable, unfixed space, a place of discovery, of endless shifts.

Take, for example, paintings that at first resemble modernist abstractions, like *No 1 <-> No 13* (2024), its frame again ever so slightly atilt. What look like pale horizontal bands, moving in and out of one's focus, represent two I Ching hexagrams: 'creativity' and 'fellowship with man'. Another, *Untitled (machine)* (2024), has built into its background hexagram no. 55, 'abundance'; once unconcealed, these qualities push generously against mechanized elements, like the invented machinery in the latter painting, which suggests an antenna-like dish or speaker cone. This in turn contrasts against the freewheeling, almost ear-like form that lands somewhere between image and writing, like Chinese writing itself – a multifarious and beckoning betweenness, it might be clear by now, being where these works situate themselves.

That, in turn, might be further apparent in how Zheng's works situate themselves in relation to art history. A viewer versed in the western canon might look at *Untitled* (2025) and see echoes of the machine paintings of Francis Picabia and Marcel Duchamp. Someone who knows horology, though, may recognize a modified version of the *fusee*, a conical spindle that's part of antique watches, that makes the machine run. This machine is one we wouldn't normally see, and in that fact, and in the context of this show, resides a glimmering cultural critique: that an invisible machine is now endlessly operant, driven by a synthesis of capitalism and technology, and we are all caught up in machine metaphors and expected to serve as cogs. There are very few spaces even within culture that are not instrumentalized now, not expected to deliver a message, held open to free aesthetic-interpretative play. In pointing towards and pushing back against what lies ominously, barely registered, beneath worldly visibility – an angle of meaning that coexists, near-ironically, with a refusal to be subsumed by meanings – Leah Ke Yi Zheng reminds us that art is, or can be, one such space.

– Martin Herbert