

Tseng Kwong Chi's First Major Retrospective at Block Museum

Artist produced large body of witty, performance-based photos in 1980s

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Tseng Kwong Chi, *East Meets West Manifesto*, 1983, from the *East Meets West* series. C-print, printed 2014. Courtesy Muna Tseng Dance Projects, Inc., New York.

EVANSTON, Ill. --- Born in Hong Kong, educated in Vancouver and Paris, and later based in New York City, Tseng Kwong Chi (1950-1990) produced a large body of witty, playful, performance-based photography that both captured the pivotal downtown Manhattan art and club scenes of the 1980s and reflected the increasingly globalized movement of people across nations and continents.

Tseng called himself an “inquisitive traveler, a witness of my time and an ambiguous ambassador.” His works alternately function as witness to his life and community and as wry social commentary, raising critical questions about identity and culture.

“[Tseng Kwong Chi: Performing for the Camera](#),” on view at Northwestern University’s [Block Museum of Art](#) from Sept. 17 to Dec. 11, 2016, is the first major solo museum exhibition of the photographer’s works, which have long sparked the imaginations of younger artists.

The exhibition features more than 80 photographs, including well-known works -- such as Tseng’s

collaborations with Keith Haring and his “East Meets West” and “Expeditionary” series -- as well as examples from the artist’s archive that have rarely been shown. An opening celebration this fall will be held on Saturday Oct. 1.

A Significant Exhibition and a Significant Partnership

“Performing for the Camera” is co-organized by New York University’s [Grey Art Gallery](#) and the [Chrysler Museum of Art](#) in Norfolk, Virginia. The late Amy Brandt, who was the McKinnon Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Chrysler, curated the show.

“Until now, the critical understanding of Tseng’s multifaceted oeuvre has been limited by the few works that have been on public view,” noted Brandt. “Art audiences have not had the opportunity to take in the full scope of Tseng’s powerful imagery, with its striking social, political and philosophical implications, nor to appreciate his impact on younger generations of artists. The exhibition’s subtitle, ‘Performing for the Camera,’ emphasizes the aspects of masquerade, theatricality and performance at the root of his conceptual photographic practice. With this exhibition, we are proud to carve a niche for Tseng Kwong Chi in the pantheon of postmodern innovators, where he so rightly belongs.”

“Performing for the Camera” opened at the Grey Art Gallery on April 21, 2015. It toured to the Chrysler Museum of Art and the Tufts University Art Gallery at the Shirley and Alex Aidekman Arts Center.

The Block Museum’s upcoming exhibition in fall 2016 will be the final presentation of the tour. During its run the exhibition has been widely praised in reviews by [Hyperallergic](#), [Boston Globe](#) and [Photograph Magazine](#). Ken Johnson of [The New York Times](#) called the show “an entertaining and edifying exhibition” surveying “the brief but prolific 10-year career of one of the decade’s more scintillating but lesser-known players.”

“This significant exhibition marks an important ongoing exchange with our colleagues at the Grey Art Gallery and at university art museums across the country,” said Lisa Corrin, the Block Museum Ellen Phillip Katz Director. “In recent years we have been proud to share with the Grey major exhibitions organized by the Block, including ‘[A Feast of Astonishments: Charlotte Moorman and the Avant-Garde](#)’ and ‘[The Left Front: Radical Art in the ‘Red Decade.](#)’ Institutions of our scale are uniquely poised to advance the field through the presentation and scholarship of art and artists who have been under recognized elsewhere. We are happy to be supporting each other as we illuminate new areas of art historical research, and present multidimensional artistic practices within our exhibitions.”

The museum’s curators are looking forward to connecting Tseng’s compelling work to its audiences on the Northwestern Evanston campus and in the Chicago area.

“Tseng’s work will not only be engaging to those with an interest in photography and contemporary art, but to broader audiences as well,” Block Museum curator Janet Dees said. “Tseng’s photographs address issues of popular culture, politics, cosmopolitanism and cultural diversity, among others. Humor and a keen observational eye combine to produce work that is both intelligent and accessible.”

“Inquisitive Traveler”

Tseng, whose parents fled Communist China to settle in Hong Kong, was born in 1950. When he was 16 years old, his family relocated to Vancouver. After studying briefly at the University of British Columbia, Tseng moved to Paris in 1974 to attend the prestigious Académie Julian, where he began to seriously study photography. After moving to New York in 1978, Tseng began crafting the performative self-portraits that form the backbone of his artistic practice.

For his landmark “East Meets West” series, which he began in 1979 -- and which evolved into “The Expeditionary Series” -- Tseng adopted the identity of a visiting Chinese official, wearing a deadpan expression and a “Mao suit.” Describing himself as both an “ambiguous ambassador” and an “inquisitive traveler,” he assumed the role of a dedicated tourist crisscrossing the globe, always an outsider in a foreign land. These strikingly formal yet performance-based images feature the artist posing before popular tourist sites, such as the Brooklyn Bridge, the Eiffel Tower and Mount Rushmore, and in magnificent natural settings such as the Canadian Rockies and the Grand Canyon. By embarking on his own version of a Grand

Tour, Tseng was determined to find and identify what was quintessentially American.

“Ambiguous Ambassador”

Tseng’s genius for performance allowed him to act as a social chameleon, insinuating himself with great poise into nightclubs, art openings, beach parties and posh society evenings. He snapped innumerable Polaroids of himself with attendees as they entered these events, soliciting the autographs of friends and celebrities alike, which he assembled into dense photomontages stapled onto board.

These dynamic montages, which have rarely been seen, display the artist’s interests in series and groupings, and are a highlight of the exhibition. In all the photographs portraying these social encounters, Tseng’s immutable costume and Asian identity mark him as an outsider. In “performing for the camera,” Tseng found a way to infiltrate public spaces in new ways.

“Ironically, while Tseng stood out in his images in his guise of Chinese dignitary -- and, in most cases, the only Asian in the room -- his Mao suit allowed for a certain acceptance into social and political circles,” observed Brandt.

In his “Costumes at the Met” series, Tseng insinuated himself into the exclusive reception for The Costume Institute’s exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, “The Manchu Dragon: Costumes of the Ch’ing Dynasty, 1644–1912,” which was organized by Diana Vreeland. The exhibition brought together 150 lavish imperial robes worn by emperors and empresses of the Ch’ing dynasty. Then called “Party of the Year,” the reception was attended by more than 600 guests. As Tseng wandered around the gala, his assistant Dan Friedman snapped photographs of him standing next to major figures from the worlds of art, politics and fashion -- including Paloma Picasso, Nancy Kissinger and Yves Saint Laurent. This series clearly demonstrates how the artist inserted questions of geopolitics and cultural fetishism into the museum’s emphasis on glamorous couture.

“A Witness of His Time”

A portion of Tseng’s artistic practice was connected to his work as a photojournalist. For his little-known 1981 “Moral Majority” series, Tseng shed his Mao uniform for a genteel seersucker suit, to develop a photo-essay on some of the more conservative members of the Republican Party. With artist Kenny Scharf as his assistant, Tseng convinced well-known figures of the Reagan era to pose in front of a heavily wrinkled American flag. In so doing, he anticipated Sacha Baron Cohen, Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart’s parodies of television hosts, journalists and other interviewers, which have become an indispensable feature of our present media landscape.

The cheeky satire of the “Moral Majority” series echoes the fashion photos Tseng shot for a 1980 article in the Soho Weekly News, “It’s a Reagan World!” a collaboration with his friend Ann Magnuson. For these photographs, artist friends such as Jack Smith, Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf and Magnuson herself, presented their take on young Republicans, dressing in “conservative drag.” Their ironic, punked-out take on preppy style suggests fashion’s power to effect political critique, a constant theme in Tseng’s practice.

In another guise, Tseng was an eager and reliable witness to his time, documenting not only his friend Keith Haring’s subway drawings, but also downtown New York’s lively art and nightclub scenes, including among his photographic subjects such notable cultural figures as Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat.

A Cross-Cultural Legacy

Though recognition for Tseng’s work in the West may have been eclipsed by his early death from AIDS-related causes at the age of 39, his work has played an important role in the development of contemporary Chinese art. In the 1980s artists such as Ai Weiwei, Zhang Huan and Song Dong, learned about Tseng’s photographs through American art magazines, and his photographs have been and continue to be significant touchstones for a new generation of contemporary Chinese art photographers. Tseng’s work laid the foundations for art that considers the shifts in Chinese identity in a rapidly changing and increasingly globalized culture. In this way, the exhibition adds a missing piece to the global study of contemporary Chinese photography.

“Tseng Kwong Chi: Performing for the Camera” Exhibition Catalog

“Tseng Kwong Chi: Performing for the Camera” is accompanied by [an illustrated 178-page publication](#) exploring Tseng’s work, his place in the downtown scene and his importance for contemporary artists who also address the nexus of identity, politics and performance. The catalog includes an essay, “On Infiltration,” by Northwestern University’s [Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson](#), assistant professor of performance studies, which investigates the guerrilla-like performance tactics that Tseng consistently employed.

Discussing the artist’s “Costumes at the Met” series, Chambers-Letson elaborates on how Tseng -- amidst prominent fashion designers, socialites and other celebrities at the 1980 Chinese-themed gala at The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Costume Institute -- convincingly played the part of a “potentially authentic signifier of Chineseness.” Tseng’s consistent strategy of “infiltration” is, Chambers-Letson concludes, “a keystone of his insurgent aesthetics.”

The catalog also includes memories from Muna Tseng who reminisces about her rambunctious, fashion-conscious, cross-dressing older brother, who entertained the family, directing theatrical productions featuring his siblings and cousins. Other contributors to the catalogue include: Lynn Gumpert, director of the Grey Art Gallery at New York University; the late Amy Brandt, Ph.D., former McKinnon Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, Chrysler Museum of Art; and Alexandra Chang, curator of special projects and director of the Global Arts Program, Asian/Pacific/American Institute, at New York University. Through five authors’ original research and new perspectives, this book offers unparalleled insights into the world of one of the late 20th century’s most underappreciated artists. “Tseng Kwong Chi: Performing for the Camera” is a definitive and indispensable artist’s monograph.

Sponsorship

“Tseng Kwong Chi: Performing for the Camera” was organized by the Grey Art Gallery at New York University and the Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia, with the support of the Mapplethorpe Foundation. The exhibition was conceived and curated by the late Amy Brandt, McKinnon Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Chrysler Museum of Art, and is presented in her memory. The Block Museum’s presentation of “Tseng Kwong Chi: Performing for the Camera” has been generously supported by Zeynep Keyman and the David C. and Sarajeun Rutenberg Arts Foundation.

Topics: Arts and Events