

CRISTIN TIERNEY

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PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

People's republic of all over the place

By Mark Feeney GLOBE STAFF FEBRUARY 04, 2016

MEDFORD — What's good about "Tseng Kwong Chi: Performing for the Camera" is memorably good. How can a combination of deadpan hilarity and cross-cultural collision not be? As for what's not good, well, it's certainly diverting, especially if you have a thing for the 1980s. The show runs through May 22 at the Tufts University Art Gallery.

Tseng (1950-90) grew up in Hong Kong and Vancouver and studied in Paris. A Red Guard he was not. Visiting New York in 1979, he was the inadvertent beneficiary of propriety bumping up against happenstance, with an antic assist from geopolitics. Tseng was supposed to meet his parents at the World Trade Center. He didn't have a suit to wear. Looking for something not too casual, he came across a Mao jacket and trousers he'd bought at a Montreal thrift shop. (Already you can see a disappearance of boundaries, political and otherwise.) So that's what Tseng wore — and was mistaken for a "visiting Chinese dignitary." Thus was born a decade-long examination of cultural identity.



Tseng Kwong Chi's "New York, New York (Brooklyn Bridge)."

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Two series bookend Tseng's career, "East Meets West" and "Expeditionary." Both consist of large black-and-white photographs, with Tseng sharing the frame with some unmistakably American or European site: the World Trade Center, the Brooklyn Bridge, Mount Rushmore, Niagara Falls, the Hollywood sign, the Eiffel Tower. Tseng wears his Mao jacket, of course. No less important are wraparound shades and a stony expression.

Incongruity — the intersection of seeming incommensurables — is what defines the images. Any sense of emotion or personality would be a distraction. Tseng is in on the joke, of course. He's the one making it. But he never lets on that he's in on it, which makes the joke vastly funnier.

The basic setup of "East Meets West" gets reversed in "Expeditionary." In the former, Tseng looms large in the foreground. In the latter, he can almost get lost in the landscape. Is this visitor overwhelmed? Disappearing? Whatever the reason, the images are now more poignant than amusing.



Jorge Tacla's "Hidden Identities."

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Part of the '80s soundtrack accompanying the show is Culture Club's "Karma Chameleon." It's a witty choice, since the point of both series is that Tseng's assumed identity is anything but chameleonic. Even as everything around him changes, our man on the scene never does.

Wait: '80s soundtrack? Technically, it doesn't accompany the exhibition, just the slide show that takes up much of its middle portion. Tseng was very much a part of the '80s downtown art scene in New York, along with Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf, and Jean-Michel Basquiat, habitués all of the Mudd Club and the Palladium. The slide show consists of images Tseng took of their social activities. As Pet Shop Boys and Donna Summer and David Bowie's "China Girl" play, we get to see a bare-legged Haring sitting on a toilet, or Madonna next to Andy Warhol. The effect is of an endless photo spread from a self-consciously boho version of People magazine: dank, fatuous, and fawning. Here everyone is in on the joke, which robs things of much interest beyond the merely voyeuristic.

Tseng took some 25,000 photographs of Haring and his work. Another portion of the show is dedicated to them, though blessedly fewer than the full complement. Other sections chronicle Tseng (Mao attired, but without sunglasses) crashing a 1980 gala at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute and his 1981 "Moral Majority" series, with portraits of the likes of William F. Buckley Jr. and the Rev. Jerry Falwell.

Tseng didn't intend for the '80s to define his work. Marcelo Brodsky very much intends the late '60s to define the images that make up his half of "Marcelo Brodsky/Jorge Tacla: Upheaval." The show also runs through May 22. Brodsky, a Buenos Aires-based photographer, appropriates news images of protests in Latin America, Paris, Prague, Munich, and Washington, D.C., from 1968 and '69. He superimposes texts: some descriptive, some hortatory. White frames and mattes underscore the drama and intensity of the images.

In contrast, Jorge Tacla's paintings and drawings stand outside of time: They're archetypes. Although less overtly political than Brodsky's work, their sinister air speaks to civic disquietude. There are 10 pencil drawings and 14 paintings (oil and cold wax on canvas), the latter of varying size. Their grayish-blueish palette evokes resignation rather than anger. They show collapse arrested — though with a blurriness that not only suppresses detail but also lends a provisional quality to what we're seeing. Where Tseng highlighted cultural collision between clearly (and often hilariously) defined opposites, with Tacla it's collision, pure and not so simple — or, rather, the destruction that inevitably ensues.

TSENG KWONG CHI: Performing for the Camera

MARCELO BRODSKY/JORGE TACLA: Upheaval

At Tufts University Art Gallery, 40 Talbot Ave., Medford, through May 22, 617-627-3518, artgallery.tufts.edu