

Final Version

From Here to Eternity

In 1979, upon coming to New York from Canada, the young, Hong Kong-born, Montreal and Paris-educated artist Tseng Kwong Chi dropped Joseph, his anglicized first name, in favor of Kwong Chi and reversed the sequence, giving his surname precedence in accordance with Asian custom. At the same time, he donned an immaculate grey Mao suit found in a thrift shop, added mirrored sunglasses, short cropped hair and impassive expression to construct an alternative persona that would become the star of his *Expeditionary Series*, a ten-year project formerly known as *East Meets West*. These are not conventional self-portraits. Instead, as provocative, elegantly ironic studies of shifting stereotypes in a world that had not yet assimilated the full impact of Nixon's historic trip to China in 1972, they represent a complex system of signs. Re-assessing collisions between East and West, high art and kitsch, culture and nature and the indeterminacy and ambiguity of identity, they are predecessors to such diverse contemporary projects as Ai Wei Wei's *Fuck Off* series and Yasumasa Morimura's cross-dressing extravaganzas.

Tseng's peripatetic, reserved, very poised Communist Chinese dignitary should have been instantly suspect since it was highly unlikely that a Communist official would travel—and travel alone—to Disneyland in 1979, for instance, to stand next to Mickey Mouse or in front of Sleeping Beauty's castle clutching a cluster of helium balloons. Tseng, however, matched the clichés of a theme park with the clichés conjured by a suit

of clothes to transform disbelief into acceptance. Finely calibrated multiple deceptions and the casual revelation of those deceptions was part of the fun. The cord of the shutter release, as one trope, is always clearly visible until near the end of the series, a reminder that this is a staged photograph, a fiction in which the actual camera attached to the photographed cord is just outside the picture plane, creating a conduit between inside and outside, between fictive and real space. Tseng's uniform endowed him with both respect and revulsion but also with an authenticity rarely questioned, primarily because there were not yet precedents for this particular formulation of an Asian stereotype. Wearing it, he crashed an opulent gala at The Metropolitan Museum of Art—another site of authority based on the fictive—and was greeted by Henry Kissinger and Yves Saint Laurent as an honored guest.

Paradoxically, the Mao suit made Tseng visible at the same time it depersonalized and conferred anonymity on him. The visibility/invisibility factor was further emphasized by the sunglasses he wore, the light glancing off their reflective surface, identity doubly masked, the gaze blocked, returned to the viewer as a starburst or a blank. Another irony was that Tseng was not particularly invested in his Chineseness and his parents were Nationalists, not Communists who had fled Shanghai in 1949, the year before his birth. His unsmiling, appropriated alter ego was also nothing like the celebrant of the frenetic downtown art and fashion scene of the 1980s that most of his circle knew. A fixture at the Mudd Club and Club 57 and close friend of Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf and Cindy Sherman, Tseng was thoroughly Westernized, an dedicated urban dandy who died an untimely death in 1990 at the age of 39, struck down by AIDS, the same scourge

that extinguished many of the decade's brightest lights. But Tseng was a serious artist and there were aspects to him that were more private, reserved not for the party circuit but for his art.

The beauty of Tseng's flawless photographs continues to dazzle. First using a Rolleiflex inherited from his father and later, a Hasselblad, this series of 100 carefully selected, singularly arresting images were taken between 1979-1989 as Tseng traveled across America and then the world: England, France, Holland, Brazil, Japan, Italy and elsewhere. His own paparazzo, he cast himself as the ultimate tourist in the ultimate tourist snapshots, except they are technically superb, and meant to be, contradicting any idea of amateur endeavor. A kind of Mao surrogate, Tseng's dignitary also preceded the deluge of Mao likenesses that has poured out of China in the past decade or so, an obsession of contemporary Chinese artists only now showing signs of abatement.

Often framed close-up, cropped, head tilted, gaze directed upward and outward beyond the pictorial space, Tseng, an early globalist, indefatigably recorded his travels in hyperreality (as Umberto Eco called his journey through America), his own pointed version of the grand tour. He photographed himself—his poses in response to the location—with the Hollywood sign, Goofy, Mount Rushmore and other icons of high kitsch. He photographed himself with national landmarks such as the Golden Gate Bridge, the Brooklyn Bridge, the Empire State Building, the World Trade Center—a startling 1979 image of Tseng and the soaring, angular towers, silver against black sky—the Statue of Liberty, the Lincoln Memorial, London Bridge, the Houses of Parliament,

the Eiffel Tower, Notre Dame, Sacre Coeur, the Great Buddha of Kamakura, the statue of Christ in Rio and on and on. He had also taken photographs more overtly political, such as Three Mile Island and Cape Canaveral, a critique of government also seen in many of his images of historic monuments, symbols of a nation's power, prestige and pretensions. One less assuming but sympathetic photograph from 1979 shows Tseng in a field in Tennessee examining open bolls of cotton and is fraught with associations from slavery to the Civil War, the Civil Rights Movement, southern rural poverty to our present uneasy discourse on class and race. He once said, in an often quoted remark, "I am an inquisitive traveler, a witness of my time and an ambiguous ambassador."

By 1986, the mood of the photographs had altered radically. Tseng began to take more and more pictures of spectacular landscapes like Monument Valley and the Grand Canyon in Arizona, the Badlands of South Dakota and the Canadian Rockies reminiscent of Ansel Adams' majestic vistas and the paintings of the American sublime by Frederic Church, Thomas Cole and Albert Bierstadt. Although still wearing his Mao suit, the figure of the artist is now quite small, often facing into the pictorial space, not only an observer but also integrated, absorbed into the landscape. Lost in the grandeur of the panorama, like a tiny figure in a Caspar David Friedrich painting or a Chinese scroll, Tseng's message had also changed. No longer a mocking, playful commentary on cultural perceptions and misperceptions, the ambiguous ambassador regales us with earth's beauty and life's fragility. The metaphor of the solitary wanderer, of the artist as observer and the other, central to his project, has been removed from the social and man-made milieus and returned to its final, existential context, that of nature.

In a poignant photograph from 1985 pivotal to this transition, the downtown reveler is seated serenely in a small boat on Lake Ninevah in Vermont. He is silhouetted against low hills and mist and reflected in the stillness of the water as part of the landscape, at one with nature. It is a work that evokes a Chinese ink painting and connects him to his cultural heritage in a profoundly spiritual way, as he pauses for a moment, a still point in the turning world, his pilgrimage not quite done, mortality in abeyance, his two selves reconciled, the outsider embraced, the wanderer almost home.

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