

Alone Again, Naturally

Tseng Kwong Chi neither entered nor left this world by himself, but the photographs he made while he was among us remain a powerful embodiment of the philosophical paradox within the designation of the self as a lone individual, in the midst of an increasingly public, crowded world. While a key member of the rowdy 80s brat-pack including Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf and John Sex, Tseng's visually austere work does not, at first, reveal its fundamental connection with the more boisterous cosmos of graffiti, clubbing and drag which was his natural social milieu. In fact, one can scarcely imagine two more irreconcilable points of reference than the nerdy, touristic locations that Tseng inevitably chose for his black-and-white self-portraits, and the glittering circle of mid-1980s downtown club life. If anything, the particular reticence of Tseng's art seems to hold the key to its unexpected resilience through the passage of time, making it, if anything, more relevant today than in 1990, the year the artist, age 39, succumbed to his year-long struggle with AIDS.

Eleven years earlier, Tseng Kwong Chi had still been Joseph Tseng, a young Hong Kong-born artist eking out a modest existence in downtown New York. Donning a second-hand Mao suit—first on a family outing and later at an opening of Ch'ing Dynasty costumes at the Metropolitan Museum—the artist was taken aback by the extremes of other people's reactions to his new appearance. By some he was offered deference, by others scorn, but the crucial difference was that he was suddenly not invisible, and for a struggling young artist such good fortune can never be taken lightly. The personage he was automatically taken to be while wearing the uniform of the Chinese Revolution invariably transformed every social occasion into a seriocomic ritual of cultural diplomacy. Tseng was not simply a visitor from faraway China—he was the embodiment of a cultural difference that permeated all aspects of his being. At a historical moment when identity politics and contemporary art were still taking each other's measure, Tseng's photographic alter-ego became the quintessential outsider, for whom nothing can be assumed and everything must be explained.

One of the central underpinnings of Tseng's work is the Warholian conviction, shared with his better-known friends and contemporaries, that the artist is obliged to create more than the art itself—he must also clearly occupy a nexus of historical, critical, and ethical associations that provide the viewer with a contextual framework through which the art can be deployed to interpret the world around it. It is in this regard particularly that times have caught up with Tseng Kwong Chi. Inevitably, we examine his images today through several interwoven membranes, the most poignant of which is the tenuous veil of mortality. All of us who toil in the fields of visual culture are familiar with the downward tug of bathos that accompanies the taking of a tourist snapshot: here we are, hoping to be recognized sometime in the future by dint of our momentary association with some greater, better-known emblem of the world's collective knowledge of itself. The moment thereby enshrined will always exist in the past, just as we too will someday be part of the past. But since the snapshot itself is a popular art form—not viewed by the masses so much as created by them—it gives us a shiver of unwanted recognition to expand, for the sake of discussion, our definition of artist just enough to include those multitudes

snapping away at themselves and each other at Rockefeller Center, the Taj Mahal and Chartres. Tseng, whose artistic motives were much more complex, nonetheless took these aspects of the snapshot into account when he embarked on his photographic journey to the world's most familiar places. The main difference between Tseng and the infinitude of camera-packing tourists is that when we look at his face today, we can immediately identify him as the man of the future, the one whose image is predicated on the knowledge that someday he will no longer exist.

That Tseng was visually focusing on his Chinese-ness at a moment in geopolitical politics when the magnitude of China's potential was starting to be publicly acknowledged seems of particular importance to his undertaking. His appropriation of an entire culture was not a political gesture on his part so much as a form of acknowledgement that the West's stereotypical concept of Asian identity was so deeply rooted in ignorance that the very idea that Tseng's 'official' identity was a put-on was itself a kind of absurdity, since almost no one would have known how to behave in the presence of the real thing. If there is any deeper political meaning to the work, it lies in its ominous suggestion that Communism in China may outlast its greatest skeptics and become the world's success story, so that Tseng's vision of millions of unsmiling party members lining up for their photos at Disney World may not seem so peculiar fifty years from now, except that they probably won't be wearing uniforms and they will be smiling.

Tseng's identity as a gay man provides one of the more ambiguous aspects to this art. Certainly a case can be made for his attraction to the role of outsider in light of the fact that his foreign, Chinese identity happened to coincide with his sexual identity, which would have made him an outsider on another level as well. In a sense, however, the performative, campy side to Tseng's artistic character is hidden in plain sight, if we merely consider his role-playing as a kind of drag. Poker-faced in full masquerade, Tseng never lets on that his character thinks any of this is less than dead serious, which is why his photographs can sometimes strike us as unbelievably funny. The man who slipped off with his boyfriend to go hiking and canoeing in the Canadian Rockies is quite explicitly not the one we see in these photographs, and we almost hold our breath in anticipation of the moment after the photograph has been taken, for the stiff, straight pose to be dropped, and smile to return, naturally.

-Dan Cameron
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