

Journal of Curatorial Studies

Volume 9 Number 1

© 2020 Intellect Ltd Exhibition Review. English language.

https://doi.org/10.1386/jcs_00015_5

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

CHEN DONGFAN, *SANCTUARY*

Curated by Xin Wang, Yeh Art Gallery, New York, 30 January–1 May 2020

Reviewed by Peiyue Wu, Independent Critic

While critiques of the narrow definition of contemporary art and the hierarchy of media have persisted for decades, they are now joined by the glaring issue of racial and ethnic inequality in the art world. To counterbalance the preference for conceptual art prevalent on the global art scene (and the white dominance inseparable from conceptualism), today's institutions have enhanced inclusiveness and democracy by providing a career ladder to outsider artists in two ways. First, performing artists and street artists, who used to lack institutional recognition, are now actively integrated into public programmes in many museums. Second, ethnic minority artists have gradually migrated from the margins of contemporary art to a more central place, thereby addressing their under-represented history and drawing curatorial attention. However, both initiatives are partially stunted by institutional limitations. The intricate inner voices and complex personal histories of performing artists and street artists often gave way to the philanthropic goal of public programmes, while ethnic minority artists tend to resort to self-mythologizing or over-identifying themselves with their cultural heritage rather than intervening in broader sociopolitical discourse.

Expectation of such shortcomings set me up for a surprising encounter at Chen Dongfan's exhibition *Sanctuary* (2020), where the curator of the show, Xin Wang, set a new benchmark in terms of welding the two strategies, resulting in a more impactful presentation. Wang transformed the artist's personal reflection on the site's geopolitical history into public programmes engaging with the venue's current demographic circumstances, which ultimately allowed the artist to break through the original cultural strata and create a broader civic dialogue. Moving from China to New York in 2017, Chen became familiar with the Asian American community in New York after completing the Department of Transportation's seasonal street programme in 2018, where he

turned a 200-foot asphalt section of Doyer Street in Chinatown into a colourful mural (Tumin 2018). Through labour-intensive action painting in that site-specific project, Chen managed to connect psychological tension, which he had personally experienced as a new immigrant, with a community shaped by the arduous history of Chinese immigration to the United States.

For *Sanctuary*, Wang put Chen into a dialogue with a more complex and layered geopolitical reality, one that did not completely coincide with the artist's personal experience or cultural lineage: 'I pushed Chen to do a lot of research about the multifaceted history encapsulated in the venue. To unpack the whole thing requires a huge amount of mental effort and imagination for newer immigrants like Chen' (Wang 2020). The exhibition took place in Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall, a traditional oriental architecture housing the Institute of Asian Studies at St John's University. As Wang remarked, 'The venue was itself a Cold War era residue, its construction was funded by Taiwan's Chiang Kai-shek administration in the 1970s as a diplomatic gesture' (Wang 2020). What complicates the historical circumstances of the site is that this building is part of a private Roman Catholic university founded in 1870 to provide moral education to young people from low-income families (Singer 1971). Now it is a campus made up of students from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

Responding to the architecture's East Asian lineage and traditional Chinese style, Chen created a series of black-and-white paintings, contrary to his usual preference for a full palette. As noted in the press release, 'The artist hopes to reconcile "calligraphic energy into the destructive potency of graffiti"' (Yeh Art Gallery 2020). In *The Stone-picking God* (2019) and *The House that Woke from Death* (2019), the use of monochrome not only harmonized the mixing of figures from classical and urban legends across different cultures, but also set a sober tone for addressing the timeless theme of the relationship between humans and disaster, hardship and death. Besides myth and folklore, Chen's references ranged from classical music to science fiction (Chen 2020). Such hybrid sources made Chen's work come across as cryptic, disquieting, frisky and bold simultaneously. Although the use of monochrome raised the suspicion of strategic self-orientalism, his cartoonish doodles and scrawls challenged the calligraphic stereotype that the West often holds towards Chinese art. Unlike the practice of the previous generation of Chinese artists who relocated to New York at the end of the twentieth century, Chen's punky mythological figures, executed with sweeping brush strokes, convey a worldview through the lens of popular culture, rather than offering white elites an updated version of 'contemporary ink painting'. 'The iconoclastic nature of graffiti helps me to break cultural barriers between different immigrant groups,' remarked Chen (2020).

As the monochrome paintings hanging in the gallery rhetorically responded to the historical context of the site, the curator commissioned Chen to execute a mural on the walkway leading towards the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall, expanding the significance of the exhibition by an explicit interaction with the site. The mural's vibrant hues transformed the outdoor space of the gallery into a stage, incorporating passing visitors into a performance, and tacitly integrating the heterogeneous ethnic profile of the university site. A focus on engagement continued in *The Sanctuary Club* (2020), where Chen invited the collaboration of the audience to create a collective mind map in a blackboard drawing. After Chen sketched out his evolving thoughts towards the exhibition, visitors could add whatever Chen's markings reminded them of. As the whole process was freewheeling and associative, participants inevitably shifted from focusing on their own drawings to finishing each other's



Chen Dongfan, *Sanctuary* (2020), installation views. Above: *Sun Yat-sen Road in Color* (2020), site-specific mural. Below: The artist in front of *The Sanctuary Club* (2020) after the performance. Photos: © Chen Dongfan, courtesy of the artist and Yeh Art Gallery at St John's University, New York.

thoughts. This naive and childlike approach underlined a belief shared by the artist and the curator: that a fusion of community is generated by what is legible to all rather than by a forced pedagogy aimed at forcing people of different cultural backgrounds to grasp each other's venerable traditions.

The performance took place at a time when the coronavirus outbreak was sweeping through China, and many people expressed their conflicted emotions about the situation in rapidly executed, off-the-cuff sketches. Apart from mathematical formulas, illustrations of double-stranded DNA molecules, and signs alluding to laboratory science, there were slogans such as 'Wuhan, add oil!' and 'no victory without sacrifices', which explicitly drew attention to the COVID-19 crisis. During the performance, Chen erased all prior markings one after another with his hands. Then, processing and internalizing all the thoughts left by participants, Chen turned the blackboard into an abstract painting consisting of chalk powder. Suddenly, the memorial hall became an intimate space for viewers to collectively contemplate a public tragedy.

For Chen, 'sanctuary' evokes ecclesiastic traditions of housing that displaced civilians. Taking *Sanctuary* as the title of his first institutional exhibition in New York, Chen aimed to engage with people from different cultural backgrounds and test the idea of whether art can provide a familiar space for the unlikely of encounters. However, in the rapidly escalating COVID-19 pandemic, a more prophetic meaning of the exhibition began to emerge: a community can only be recognized against a context from which it differentiates itself, and that context would be post-COVID-19 New York. The devastation caused by the pandemic would need to be ameliorated. Everyone that had been luckily sheltered would need to work together to prevent the drift of the pandemic from turning into societal tragedy precipitated by political inertia, poverty and racism. The challenge, what matters most, is the collective vision promised by *Sanctuary*, a space for recharging, re-engaging and reimagining the revolutionary community. The unfinished work of the historic reconciliation can always be scratched from a blank page.

References

- Chen, Dongfan (2020), interview with the author, New York, 8 January.
- Singer, Glenn (1971), 'Asian Studies to Be Stressed at New Center at St. John's', *New York Times*, 10 October, <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/10/10/archives/asian-studies-to-be-stressed-at-new-center-at-st-johns.html>. Accessed 23 April 2020.
- Tumin, Remy (2018), 'He's Painting the Streets Red. And Yellow. And Blue', *New York Times*, 27 July, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/27/nyregion/doyers-street-chinatown-mural-chen-dongfan.html>. Accessed 23 April 2020.
- Wang, Xin (2020), interview with the author, New York, 8 January.
- Yeh Art Gallery (2020), 'Chen Dongfan: Sanctuary', <https://sjuartgallery.org/Chen-Dongfan-Sanctuary>. Accessed 23 April 2020.

E-mail: jessicawupy@gmail.com