’He was playing with people’s perception of who he was, while proclaiming who he was.’

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Tseng Kwong Chi, “San Francisco, CA” (1979), silver gelatin print, 36“x36”

Tseng Kwong Chi’s photographs are playful critiques informed by an outsider identity and the grit and glitter of 1980s-era New York. Born in Hong Kong in 1950, he was educated in Paris, and eventually settled in the East Village with his sister, Muna, in 1978. Kwong Chi was a gay, HIV-positive Chinese immigrant who refused these labels, although his photographs were made during the height of the AIDS crisis when it became nearly impossible to disentangle the themes of alienation and isolation in his East Meets West and Expeditionary series from the devastating toll of HIV/AIDS later in his life.

In the East Meets West series, Kwong Chi is dressed in a thrift store Mao suit, his stoic gaze obscured by a pair of reflective sunglasses. A self-identified “ambiguous ambassador,” he looms, front and center, before Western landmarks like Niagara Falls and the Golden Gate Bridge. His immersive black-and-white silver gelatin prints transport the viewer to global tourist locations, the images reading like a set of film stills. In the Expeditionary series he’s dwarfed by vast American landscapes. These are a quieter, more melancholic progression of Kwong Chi’s work, as he contemplates the Grand Canyon or Lake Moraine in the wilderness of the Northwest. Kwong Chi uses the camera as a tool to capture his performance art: the spectacle of this lonely, foreign persona.

However, Kwong Chi’s queerness and charisma find an outlet in his lurid Polaroids from the party scene of ’80s New York. Kwong Chi ran in close circles with Keith Haring, Cindy Sherman, Andy Warhol, Basquiat, John Sex, and other well-connected artists and performers. Kwong Chi is almost always the lone queer Asian body, but here, in the lush nightlife, he’s found kinship with other alternative, transgressive folk.

Tseng Kwong Chi passed away from AIDS-related complications at age 39, yet he was wildly prolific from 1979 to 1989, the year before his death. The 80-some photographs in his first touring retrospective, Performing for the Camera, satirized tourist culture, right-wing America, and the prevailing white American notion of the unknowable Asian “other.”

The following is a transcribed interview between Visual AIDS intern Maia Paroginog and Muna Tseng, Kwong Chi’s sister, about Kwong Chi’s life and artistic practice.

How did you relate to your brother as an artist? I believe you shared an apartment at the time. Was there any sort of collaboration?
We both came to New York in 1978 to become artists, myself in the field of dance and performance, very much against our parents’ wishes. In 1978 New York was practically falling off the map. There was a lot of crime and it was bankrupt. It was a tough city, not like New York today. But we both felt like fish to water when we arrived. We shared a loft together on 21st Street and Seventh Avenue; our first apartments were a block from each other on the East Village. We felt liberated from both Chinese family values and expectations, and our Canadian immigration experience. We were happy campers. I think New York was where he’d found kindred spirits. And

we supported each other. He did all my dance photography and posters. It was a very exciting adventure. We had each other as well as our exciting milieu.

What did it mean for Tseng to “perform for the camera?”
The title of the exhibition was conceived by Amy Brandt, who is the original curator of the show. Kwong Chi was mixing visual art and performance. He also had the ability to convince others, or corral them, into performing for his camera, from his Polaroid party scenes or with “moral majority” Senators and Congressmen whom he got to pose in front of a crumpled American flag. I think it’s a very apt title for the show.

Tseng takes on multiple identities such as the “ambiguous ambassador.” Can you speak more about the roles he embodied and where they might have originated from?
Right, the “ambiguous ambassador” was used after he met Yves Saint Laurent at the Met. It was the exhibition Manchu Dragon: Costumes from the Ch’ing Dynasty, and he brought his camera. It was a highly glamorous gala where all the guests were dressed to the nines, in some Chinoiserie costumes or Asian fantasy. He was speaking with Saint Laurent because he was interviewing the guests about what they were wearing and what they thought of the show.

Yves Saint Laurent and Kwong Chi were conversing in French. (My brother went to art school in France and he was very good with languages.) Yves Saint Laurent said to him, “Oh, you speak French? Well, you must be an ambassador from China.” And so he [Kwong Chi] started calling himself an “ambiguous ambassador,” which was quite cheeky!

He also coined himself “Slut for Art.” That was on the ID badge that he wore on this Chinese uniform, the Mao Zedong suit. Most of the time his ID badge said “visitor” or “visiteur” in English and French. I think he was having a lot of fun playing with people’s perceptions, like “Who is this Chinese man?”, “What is he doing?”, “Is he a visitor?”, “Is he an alien?”

We have to remember that in the ’80s, multicultural studies were not in the syllabus of universities and colleges. It was a new search for immigrants and Asian Americans to define their identity in some way. Because he was wearing that suit, it gave him a certain persona that was at once mysterious and official. So he was playing with people’s perception of who he was, as well as proclaiming who he was.

Did Tseng consider himself Chinese American? Or Chinese?
He considered himself an artist. He didn’t like the labels of “I’m a Chinese artist” or “I’m a Canadian artist” or “I’m a Hong Kong-born artist.” He said “I am an artist. I make art,”

Andy Warhol wouldn’t claim himself to be a white artist or an American artist. Well, maybe he might say he was an “American” artist because he loved American culture so much!

I also think Kwong Chi didn’t define himself as a gay artist. He didn’t like those labels, although he certainly had a lot of labels stuck on him.

Tseng was taking “selfies” before many others. How do you think he might respond to today’s culture of self-aggrandizement and the immediacy of sharing one’s documented self?
I often wonder what kind of work he would be doing today. I think the media and technology have changed so much. He used a 1940s Rolleiflex camera, a leftover of one of the last mechanical cameras, for the self-portraits. Analog uses rolls of film, so time is stretched out. And at the time, with the old technology of Polaroids, you had to wait two to three minutes for it to develop, whereas today with digital cameras, you take a selfie and you can immediately edit it, enhance it, and send it to millions of people.

It’s a very, very different state of mind. I think we have to look at his work in the time that he created it, in the era of the 1980s. But at the same time, his images are so fresh. You look at them and you may not know that he did them 35 years ago.

Muna Tseng, choreographer-dancer, founder of Muna Tseng Dance Projects, has made over 30 original works, often in collaboration with composers, directors and visual artists engaged in contemporary practice. Her works have been performed in New York and presented around the world since 1979. She is the trustee of the Tseng Kwong Chi estate.

Maia Paroginog is entering their final undergraduate year at Stanford with focuses in visual art making, arts writing, and comparative studies in race and ethnicity. Their work employs several mediums and representations, which range from abstract sculpture to figurative painting. Their artwork and academic interests revolve around bodily dysphoria, queering interpersonal relationships, intersectional feminism, power/privilege, and the abject abstract. They use queer art to interrogate notions of “identity” and are interested in its uses in addressing collective trauma.
